



Gut Bucket Blues

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1963: Ideas of Good and Evil

I.

Hell-bound according to the sacred word, nevertheless, according to Father Cancer, you were getting off easy.

"Your very presence in the world is grievous and shameful," he told you, using that fake Irish accent that he had adopted of late. This was in between bites of the blood sausage that had been prepared for him on the fortieth anniversary of his vows. A party had been held in the reformatory's mess hall where all the Father's charges had been compelled to attend. They had a "best wishes" song for him in Latin rehearsed.

You alone had refrained from singing. You mouthed the words merely, staring down at the tops your polished black shoes. More than Father Cancer's wrath, you dreaded the repercussions for the affection demonstrated to such a monster. The vulgarity involved in the deception, you thought, should be enough to rend the world in two. At minimum condemn you to the Lake of Fire. You couldn't see how anybody could tell such lies and not blacken his soul for good:

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*Accitu cari genitoris cultum !!
Accitu cari genitoris cultum !!
Metuunt ut timeas eum/
numquam occidit equum/
verberare/
numquam occidit equum/
verberare/*

Not that he lacked a sense of humor in most ordinary, non-ecclesiastical circumstances, but Father Cancer in your view was a pestilence in search of a wicked nation to lay low.

"The way you comport yourself around these premises," Father Cancer told you, "is disgusting and ridiculous at once. Not only to me but in the eyes of the Lord. Your actual existence is blasphemy," he said. "It is like an acid that is poured constantly onto Our Lord's suppurating wounds. Your impudence and insistence on your well-being is disgusting to me. These will be eradicated, I vow. They will be cut from you against your will. By this I swear as I have once sworn to serve His Church. Christ himself could descend into this room and denounce me and my hand would not be stayed. Not on this matter. You can take your own life guaranteeing you eternal damnation. That is the best outcome I see for you. In your case there is no other proper penance possible. No mush-mouthing Ave Marias spoken by you in between vulgar thoughts will suffice. To you the prayers will function like a curse. And the enabling of blasphemous utterances unto Christ's grace is not my mission statement. Here on this earth or any other. *Consummatum est.*"

The biscuit the Father was using as a ladle to sop up the blood sausage's run-off had occupied your attention through this dressing down. You had not eaten since yesterday's supper. You were swimming in hunger's ether rather, waiting for this torrent of opprobrium from your guardian to end.

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You thought about what he would do to you if you leaned over and took a bite.

Beatings were nothing to you anymore. Such threats and insults as those just delivered were the stuff of low comedy for you nowadays. In their presence, it was all you could do to stifle laughter. You had been broken of the habit of fear long ago. This was by having been exposed to the institutionalized violence of this reform school. You hadn't been a thug when consigned to its provinces at age twelve. But now at age fifteen you were as hard as they came. You stared out at the world through heavy-lidded eyes and waited calmly for an advantageous moment. Such cunning in a child was impudence personified, according to Father Cancer. And so you were beaten for it. Which only further inured you to the despair that this institution was trying to infect your soul with. You had sensed the great secret of the world. Which was that all circumstances changed. Very soon you would be free of this place. And then your vengeance could be enacted accordingly.

Brightly wrapped ordination presents from the school's staff lined the exterior of Father Cancer's wood-paneled office in the reformatory's third floor.

"How could the Lord of the World tolerate the creation of anything as vile as you," he wondered aloud in an analytical tone that admitted genuine puzzlement above malice. Once the blood sausage was entirely consumed, Father Cancer, S.J. picked the plate up and started to lick its surface, moving up and down its contours in tight rows of the same sort that he demanded a penitent mop the kitchen floor, absent of a dry spot. The wasting of food he judged to be a sin. But especially this food, the blood sausage's residue which he judged to be delicious in the extreme. He looked up from his chair and lit a cigarette. He dabbed himself with the cloth napkin that one of the reform school boys was charged with

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first washing then arranging in a perfect triangle in Father Cancer's place at every meal.

Well, if he expected an answer from you about that bit of theodicy, he would be disappointed.

"I think," you said to him after the thirty seconds of ensuing silence had insisted on some type of vocalization, "you have expressed yourself brilliantly. I think now I know everything there is to know concerning my spiritual failings according to you."

According to you. This was a prime example of the sort of sideways insolence that regularly earned boys around here striations of raised welts on their backsides. But somehow Father Cancer was knowing enough to realize this was what you had been asking for all along. In that the pain inflicted had the merciful effect of blinding you to your circumstances temporarily. With each whack of the knotted oak cane that Father Cancer used on either the knuckles or backs of the legs or the buttocks (that were demurely exposed in three inch segments by forcing you to hold your trousers in place), the institution's gray walls and slightly rectal smell faded within the mind in favor of nothing more than the avoidance of pain. It was a trade-off, counter-intuitive to an outsider, that was employed by this school's long-term internees. For them anything was better than the status quo. If they beat you and you began to bawl, they would send you back to the dormitory where absent of the other boys you could smoke or jerk off, dreaming of a Gina Lollabrigida sunrise between your slightly splayed legs.

From Father Cancer's point of view, to judge only by his muttered assessment, corporeal punishment for you would be too lenient a sentence altogether.

"Lean over here," he told you playfully after a thoughtful moment, "so I can extinguish my cigarette on your eyeball."

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Father Cancer laughed at this witticism then rang the bell at the edge of his desk which was a signal that his plate should be cleared away by somebody.

The rest of the song that six of the boys had taken turns writing (but never finished singing) went like this:

*Accitu cari genitoris cultum/
Penis meis et balls/
in recto ordine congruent/
ut tibi videbitur
in recto/
Amen...*

"Father Canner never dilly-dallies overs matters of salvation," Maeve the lunch hall attendant told you after she collected his plate. As per standard, you hadn't been dismissed from his presence officially but his jovial mood after threatening to burn out your eyeball had been taken by you as a sign that his spleen was fully vented. He had his back turned toward you, staring down at the parking lot through the foggy window. When Maeve walked out, you followed behind her. You did so slowly as you might with hands in pockets. You had no intention of letting on that you were upset by the Father's bullying. You had no intention of letting him think he had gotten to you even slightly.

He would have taken deep satisfaction even in the vague suspicion. Likely, it would have emboldened him to further actions of priestly violations against you.

In fact, you had come to suspect the father of being an atheist because of the way he had seemed to have discarded Christ's message of love so totally as to be mocking it at every turn.

"He loves you all dearly is why he does it," Maeve told you once the dish was in the kitchen sink.

Blinded in one eye at age nine by a misguided blow of a nun's strap while in her native Ireland, Maeve had been given

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a fine blue glass eye for her fiftieth birthday. This was to wear instead of an eye patch. Once it was in her socket, she had claimed to be reborn. The patch, the object of so much derision by the reprobates who flowed through this institution over the decades, had been discarded. Presently she was more or less physically unexceptional for her age and social status. She was stoop-shouldered, white haired, and arthritic in the hands due to twelve-hour days spent in the lunchroom exposed to washing detergent that within six years would be banned by the recently formed Environmental Protection Agency due to having caused corrosive damage to various species of fish after disposal. Apart from these physical infirmities, what marked her was her slavish devotion to Father Cancer. This to you was a true sign of cognitive impairment. Unlike so many of the other boys, you didn't hold any single monstrous thing she said against her. As she was obviously touched in the head and could not be held responsible for such statements.

Maeve had wanted to become a nun at some point, but Father Cancer wouldn't let her because of her unofficial but (from his perspective) favorable status as his more or less slave and general apologist for actions that would have marked him as rotten even in a conservative diocese like this one.

"Every now and again, I close my eyes and think of Christ's suffering on the cross," she told you, not bothering to complete the thought. Perhaps to her it was a complete thought, a singular experience of the Eternal that, should you have been allowed to partake in it, would have been self-evidently awesome.

Maybe there was a cut-off age for membership into the Brides of Christ (though this would have seemed utterly cruel even for the True Church).

"Father Canner is a good man and somebody to whom we owe our allegiance," Maeve the Slave said but not to you

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specifically. This was the first time you considered the possibility that the entire school might have been bugged. She was acting this way perhaps because she didn't want to be dragged into the office from which you had just emerged and given the same treatment that you had just been given. She was trying to protect herself in a way that might have been more understandable to you if it wasn't so pathetic. Unlike you after all, it was allowable for Maeve to leave the premises at any time and never return. Young as you were, you didn't understand her reticence (if not a profound inability) to do so. You couldn't see what the appeal of this place was to her. Presently you considered Father Cancer and what registered was pure outrage mixed with a slight disgust. You couldn't understand why somebody would find him formidable, let alone worthy of veneration. You had already vowed to do him dirty if the moment presented itself to you. You couldn't understand why anybody saw the situation differently than you.

Maeve's best alternative, you thought, while watching her toil silently with unprotected hands elbow deep in the astringent detergent, was to throw herself from the bell tower. During the fall, she should twist her body to have it land neck first. Then she could be at peace. Away from this place. There was no Lord on high who would protest this action. Merely she would sleep forever and forget the outrages of her former life. She would revert to zero, to non-existence. This for her would be a major step up. And even Father Cancer and his knotty hands would be out of reach for good. In her last moments, Maeve could relieve herself of the illusion of loving him. She could speak about him truly if only to herself for the first time. He would curse her for it of course if he realized. But there were limits to even his mendacity.

The only ultimate moral value in this life, the categorical imperative so to speak, was power. In a flash of insight between the school kitchen and your day's first lesson, the

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insight came to you born aloft by the slow burning rage created by the morning's events.

"If he was me and I was him," you said of Father Cancer to your desk partner, a boy with a six-inch scar on the right side of his face named Frank Hackney, "it'd be over in two fucking seconds. Or it wouldn't even start. Sure. He can whoop me all he wants now but only because he is where he is. It don't matter who he is," you said to Frank, trying to amplify the thought through words. "What only matters is the way others treat him. If he wants to whip my ass honestly," you said. "I'd like to see him try. But he wouldn't try," you said to Frank. "Why? Because it wouldn't even occur to him. That wussy."

There on the large metal industrial table that acted as the teacher's desk for this class in machinery maintenance, a blue plastic tarp was in the process of being taped down.

"If you was him," Frank Hackney said and idly ran his finger down the valley of his scar. "I wouldn't be sitting here chatting you up at the moment. Boy bugger-er extraordinaire it needs to be said, the Father. Though he'd be at extreme pains to deny it. I seen him in action semi-regularly with many of the sixth forms," he said, using the term for the twelve-year-old's they imported from the orphanages upstate as a means of checking off another name on the list. "He isolates them in their dormitory and orients 'em to life around here with pants around his ankles. He has this Pom-aide that he puts in his hair that he uses on their rears when he gots 'em spread over the bed," Frank said. "'No,' he says. 'Don't fucking scream or it's another demerit for you and we'll ship you off to the county jail for orientation there. He says to 'em, 'Don't believe me. Go check around.' He claims this institution as his dominion. A suzerain! Jesus Christ God has nothing to do with anything up here,' he says. He tells 'em to ask around if they don't believe anything he tells them. Then

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he gives 'em a piece of wood to bite down on and shoves it in good."

Prepared to believe anything negative about Father Cancer, nevertheless, you wondered aloud how it was that during all this time he had not yet been caught.

"Who says he ain't been caught," Frank said with a disinterest inappropriate to the subject matter. He went back to etching an image of a G.I. into the top of his wooden desk with a small spline-head screwdriver. "I caught him, didn't I? I'm telling you about it now. Old Maeve the lunchroom hag caught him once with his dick in a boy's ass and told me about it. The coon up there who mops the floors caught him and turned a blind eye to it. I told the coon 'next time you see it taking place you barge in. And then you can double your pay through blackmail and get every other weekend off.' But he's got 'em all too scared of their own shadow to do anything about it. They think he has the power of heaven and hell at his fingertips. That he can condemn anyone he wants to with a batting of an eyelash. I wouldn't be surprised if the fucking Pope of Rome himself were aware of his activities but is scared shitless of him. He has magical powers over certain men, that one. He just does whatever he wants to do in this life and hang the consequences. He don't care generally. Which in this life is always the secret of a man's success."

The G.I. in Frank's excellent wood etching was bug-eyed and haggard, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, staring out from a cadaverous face at some horrid enemy just beyond the image's border.

"Battle of Okinawa in 1945. The Marines lost nine thousand men in one day," Frank said to you. "Think about that for a minute: *nine thousand men in one goddamned day!* The Nips had seen it coming and were dug into the mountainside. They were ready for whatever we threw at them. They had no chance of winning, but they wanted to take as many round eyes with them as they could."

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Frank claimed that just like the martyrs of Okinawa he too would give his life for this country in some epic battle.

"It's the only honorable way to die," he told you (though it was hard to say how dedicated he was to this proposition). He was a wiseacre deep down despite his superficial glumness. His head was down just like Father Canner's had been (though for a different reason altogether). He seemed too occupied by the image he was creating to indicate to you his level of seriousness about such matters. Time would tell if he was bullshitting. Within two years, you and Frank both would have the option of enlisting. They would expunge your criminal record if you did so. Nobody would know that you had ever been in reform school and, according to your mom, this was supposed to be a good thing. Even on a college application once an honorable discharge was gained the army would lie for you. They would claim you as a graduate of some automotive technical school upstate. They would threaten whatever nosy prick was doing the investigating with a lawsuit on your behalf if they didn't relent.

It was all well and good, but even at fifteen you realized that the military was simply an extension of the same authoritarian structure so prevalent at this Catholic reform school.

"If you want to die in battle," you said to Frank Hackney, "you can die in battle on your own. On the streets, I mean. You don't need a goddamn army behind you to be shot at. Go down to the city. You can start a battle all your own and some shine will oblige you with a handmade war."

Frank continued with his desk etching. To you it was a fascinating sight to watch. Enough so that it was only when the buck's head was brought in and laid out on the tarp was there impetus enough for you to look away.

To you Frank seemed like some sort of master craftsman dedicated to his own vision. If he survived, his battle that he was determined to enter, he surely had a future as an artist.

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Maybe that or as a furniture repairman making house calls unto row houses. The big companies needed a man like Frank. Even as he was utterly positive that he didn't fucking need them.

Outside in the shop teacher's car, in the propped open trunk, the rest of the buck reclined.

Three hundred pounds of fur and hooves and parasites and cold muscle in plastic, drained of blood awaiting its fate. Maybe about twenty pounds of meat would be carved from the carcass and used for venison jerky. There was a dump for such material otherwise set up each November at the advent of deer season. In January, the dump closed, and the red snow was removed from the premises. A burial pit was dug and then shoveled over. And that was it for another year.

"As promised, men," the shop teacher, a small, non-threatening sort named Arden Smith, said to his class and took the buck head by its antlers. With some difficulty, he raised it above him, resulting in a perforation of the room's asbestos ceiling tile eight and a half feet from the floor.

Midland County was where this specimen was harvested according to Mr. Smith, via a bow with a sixty pound maximum draw weight and a five-hundred-gram arrow with a titanium point.

"Right in one haunch," he told his class, describing the arrow's resting place. Of course, this didn't bring the buck down by itself. So he had to give chase, tracking its flight with the two stalking dogs that he had rented from a local guide. Eventually the buck was found a mile away having had the tendons in its legs severed by one of the dogs. Arden Smith had his pistol at his side and he shot the buck four times in the area that he believed to house the animal's heart. He did it as a humane gesture. He had brought his two young sons with him on the hunt, and he wanted to demonstrate to them proper humane behavior unto members of the animal kingdom. Man had dominion over this world, he said. He

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said that compassion was required always for those with power over others.

Occasionally other hunters gave Arden a hard time about such views. But they too eventually would have to stand naked in front of their Maker. Deep down, Arden Smith had no desire whatsoever to engage in violent acts in the manner of so many of his peers. He hunted because it gave him a chance to be with his sons. With him, there was no thrill to a kill at all.

Once shot, the buck was carried back to the hunting lodge they had stayed at that morning. It was there that the buck's head was removed via a butcher's electric saw.

"They string it up by its hooves and wrap it for you just like it's a Christmas gift for your wife," Arden Smith told his machine shop students. He described a proper way to create a deer blind and how to keep your feet and hands from going numb in it while out in the woods in November.

The previous Thursday Arden had promised his students that if he had bagged a trophy, he would show it to them, prior to it being stuffed and mounted on his den's wall.

"Taxidermy's an inexplicable art, something like magic," Arden said to them once they had heeded his instruction to form a circle around the desk. "The treated creature is changed by the process that's undergone in a way that makes it less lifelike altogether," he said. "So they told me anyway at the hunting lodge. They said that if you want a true keepsake of your hunt, to have others view it the way God made it, then you need to keep the flesh and bone in place. At least for a little while. Well, overnight," he said. "We left it in the toolshed, transported there by a little red wagon. And it hasn't started to stink yet! Not yet!" he said. "We probably got another twelve hours left in that aspect, friends, so gather round. Tomorrow it's going to the taxidermist. And then I'll have no more problems altogether than what wall I intend to mount him on."

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A burn in the creature's fur no doubt was rendered by the electric chainsaw's spark, and to your eyes formed the same Jesuitical symbol of the black sun so prevalent in Father's Cancer's office that you couldn't help wondering what message was being sent to you here by the universe. Had Father somehow been able to inspect the head and placed the Jesuitical seal before allowing it be put on display? This was something that he might do. But you couldn't help wondering if the mark was intended for your eyes alone. It was part of God's continued torture of you likely. Or maybe He just liked the look of the goddamned symbol and wished to stamp it on everything He saw.

Some of the boys wanted to touch the buck's head as if it was a beloved pet gone to sleep. So they began a line running around the front of the desk that would allow them to do exactly this.

"Soft isn't it," Mr. Smith said to you when you held one eyelash of the creature between your thumb and index finger. Well, the lashes weren't so soft at all. The buck's hide post-mortem had lost much of its natural oils and made the individual hairs feel like straw when rubbed between the fingers.

With eyes open, the buck's enormous pupils were visible as deeply imperfect ovals staring out into its immediate surroundings utterly uncomprehending.

"It don't look very happy," you said to Mr. Smith. It was intended as a massive understatement as the deer's bottom lip was downturned to form an eternal scream. Also, its nostrils were occluded with dried blood that poured there maybe from a lodged embolus, or more likely from a wound that one of the dogs had inflicted upon it once it had been forced to the ground and its antlers were of no use any longer. The parasites it lived with were readily visible too in the head fur and some of these too were in the process of spilling out into the tarp at least one still alive.

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Not knowing what to say in reply, Arden Smith kept quiet. Eventually he pushed his slumping spectacles back onto the bridge of his nose.

"Playtime's over," he said to his students once the final boy in line had finished with the dry heaves over in a corner. A sixth form, in the past few minutes he had become overwhelmed with the buck head's gathering scent and the sight of it leaking an unidentifiable fluid slowly from its severed spine onto the tarp. He was a sensitive boy and had not been doing well at this school. The sight of suffering animals disgusted him to no end. And this set him apart from his peers who frankly were not founts of empathy.

Fellas at this school cared less about animals than they did humans. And they were contemptuous of humans to the point that they had been consigned to this pre-jail in their adolescence. They saw in this boy's retching a sign of extremely poor character. Which was to say somebody who was weak. They would deal with him in the traditional way once back in the dormitory. There was a type of social hierarchy that they felt compelled to enforce robustly. If you asked them why they hated this boy so much they wouldn't be able to offer a proper explanation why.

Separating yourself from the sniggering and the wolf calls, you migrated to the classroom window. It looked out at a drunk on a snowy sidewalk newly emerged from one of the corner bars. He was attempting to steady himself before continuing.

The drunk had his hands out at his sides like he was riding an invisible unicycle. In your judgment, he wasn't primed to make it anywhere. He would likely lie down where he now stood. Maybe he would freeze to death before the cops came for him or maybe not. But by that time school would be over and you would be stuck in the windowless chapel praying to Jesus Christ for forgiveness for crimes you weren't sure you had fucking committed in the first place.

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The next day if you were lucky there would be a stain on the sidewalk caused by human effluence to serve as the drunk's memorial. You would extrapolate what happened from the marks in the snow.

"*Blang*—right between the eyes," Frank Hackney said to himself when etching a bit of tracer fire entering the emaciated GI's skull. Just the way it was in the hell that was Okinawa, according to him. There, the dead buried the dead, so to speak. And nobody thought that was remotely unusual

II.

"Do you want to do something for me or not," the young man in the long leather jacket asked you through the reform school's fence. He was holding a package wrapped in butcher paper that was large enough to resist being shoved through one of the fence holes. Apparently, it was either too fragile or too valuable to be tossed over the security fence. The young man had no intention of scampering over the fence himself to hand it to you. The cowboy boots that he wore were beige and polished to a shimmer. The first thing that came out of his mouth after you had approached was that he would kill anyone who so much as looked sideways at them. He claimed that he won the boots on a bet. He claimed that he made the dude he had taken the boots from walk home in his stocking feet in the middle of a blizzard.

The beige leather boots featured hand stitched embroidery that showed a bucking bronco by itself on the left boot. Another bronc towered over a thrown rider on the right boot. He was about to come down with its fore hooves on the rider's head.

"Two sawbucks in it for you and maybe something a little while later," the young man said when you asked him why you should do his bidding. He wanted you to scamper over the fence onto his side and take the package somewhere he

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hadn't yet said. He wanted you to put it under your drab coat and zip up like it wasn't there. Just walk normally with your hands at your sides like it wasn't there, he said. If somebody discovered the package, you would claim it was a salami for your ma. You would claim it was in there being kept warm the way she liked salami. And the way your pa liked it too.

If you wanted to be a wise guy, the young man said, the first thing you had to be able to do was to lie convincingly.

"People stop being cruel to you when they realize you can take care of yourself," he said to you once you had jumped over to his side. It took you less than ten seconds to make the jump as you used the top of the fence like a pommel horse. This athleticism the young man found impressive. Also, your obviously willingness to break school rules in pursuit of economic opportunity he thought showed initiative. The routine punishment for being found off school grounds was immediate expulsion from this school into a home for incorrigible youth upstate.

To hear tell it, this "home" was no more than a medium-security penitentiary. Somehow you didn't give a damn after being caught. In the first place, you didn't think you would. Also, you had developed a thick enough skin to not care what steps were taken against you.

You assumed that this system of youth corrections that this reform school was a part of could have you up to your eighteenth year and that was it. You assumed that neither beatings, nor dressing downs, nor physical isolation nor straightforward rape would be enough to bring you real pain at this point. You were far away from life and looking out at it like a theatergoer looks at a stage. The drama on the stage held your attention only occasionally. Generally, you had lost the thread of a life narrative long ago. You had had it in your mind to get up and leave the theater at some point out of boredom. But for now, you were sticking around just in case something interesting might happen in the second act.

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What the young man in the leather coat was saying to you not in so many words was that there were beatings and rapes of your own that you could deal out, to people both worthy and unworthy of being violated in that way.

"I myself am a former resident of this fine institution of higher learning," he told you then lifted his coat and shirt long enough to reveal the lines of shallow scars that Father Cancer's cane invariably left upon the charges that he deemed especially incorrigible. He was an expert at this sort of "correction" and seemed to relish the opportunity to practice this dark art. In fact, the practice of administering so-called "corporeal" punishments to youth offenders had been outlawed in this state as of 1937. Father Cancer kept his own counsel in such matters. He didn't seem aware of the injunction even slightly.

According to the young man, the way you survived one of the Father's canings was to feign passing out around the fourth stroke. Once you did the Father'd be afraid you would require hospitalization. So he would put you to bed and that would be it: no more. For obvious reasons, he didn't want to deal with outside authorities. He didn't want a light shining onto his disciplinary practices even by the diocese that saw juvenile delinquency as an extension of the same Communist Menace that they were intent on overcoming as a categorical imperative. So much so that they were prepared to countenance psychopathic administrators like Father Canner if he managed to avoid the spotlight.

"It's worth a try, I'd say," the young man said to you when you feigned indifference about this technique. To him it seemed as if you were questioning his toughness. Eventually he revealed the knife stuck in the side of the cowboy boot with the fallen cowboy etched on it as a matter of recovering his pride. He was trying to show you that he wasn't yellow. You didn't think that any way, but he was trying to show you this regardless.

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Six-inch M-3, this war implement, with a blood gulley running down its center like an inverted racing stripe. According to the young man, this knife was especially lethal because nobody knew it was on his person.

"Fuck around, don't look anybody in the eye. Pretend maybe like you're retarded," he told you. "Or maybe that you're off your mash and are about to leave it all in the gutter."

The young man had sewn the sheath into the leather boot the first evening it had come into his possession. The object, he said, was to draw a mark into you as closely as possible. No fucking around here at all. He honestly thought this M-3 was more lethal than a gun. He honestly thought he had pulled one over on the waking world by keeping it on his person always.

"I sleep with it nearby, shower with it nearby, take a shit with it on, fuck with it on," he told you then briefly held it up for inspection.

A man would be dead before he knew what he had died of, according to the young man. He knew how to kill easefully with this knife. Presently he knew all the vulnerable spots on the body. Your real targets he said were the vital organs and the major arteries. His real goal was to get a man down. After this occurred, a man's bravery will generally decrease precipitously. On the street, the young man said his goal was only to get away, to survive, to win. He didn't really care about the supposed dishonor he brought upon himself regarding this underhanded method of dispatching an opponent. Generally, there was nobody willing to sing such a song out on the streets. There, a man kept his own counsel. And as he aged, he learned to lie to himself so that he never felt ashamed over anything he attempted. He would always feel he did what he had to do, even if this was false.

The young man told you that if you were as tough as you seemed this could be only the start of a lucrative relationship.

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"I come out here all the time to recruit," he said to you pointing at the reform school's dreadful gray exterior. Maeve the Slave's silhouette had passed by a third-floor window briefly. "We're always looking for capable guys in our crew," he said. "We're always looking for fresh talent, especially if you're underage and won't be tried as an adult."

Numbers running come spring when the trotters raced mostly, according to him. But sometimes there's a true need for true muscle. Or at least the appearance therein to keep somebody quiet.

"It's guts what you need more than know-how," he told you leaving it at that for now. Eventually he would be obliged to fill in the blanks. But for now, he could be as vague as he wanted.

In the working-class neighborhoods to the south, the young man's crew had recently ventured into the issuing of riot insurance.

"It's the simplest con there is," he said in a voice loud enough to confirm to you that he didn't give a damn if anybody from the school was listening in. "You make a pitch for protection then go get a nigger from the city and give him a baseball bat. Then you pay him ten bucks to come by and bust up a given store. He'll do so willingly of course. Then you come by and make the pitch again. You commiserate with whoever it is about the way the neighborhood has gone to shit. Yes, yes, you say to them. The niggers, the niggers! Then you sell them the policy."

In addition to this shakedown they would flag down gas trucks just out of their fueling stations and create artificial shortages. Then they would resell the stolen amounts for what appeared as a discount price.

Nothing so severe at least for somebody underage with an expunged record the young man said. In his case probation would be granted for a first and even a second offense. The

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jails were full of shines nowadays. Likely they had been made for them alone.

"I like the way you shut your mouth and don't fake injury," he said to you about his discarded advice. "You don't wanna get out of it. Maybe not so much brains, but character. To me it shows that you're not somebody interested in taking the easy way out. Somebody with backbone maybe to put it another way."

In reality, you had no problem taking the easy way out regarding most matters. The reason you would refuse to feign injury in the case of Father Cancer's beatings was that you had the insight that to do so would be giving into him, submitting to his authority if only when admitting that he had hurt you physically. You preferred to remain silent and stoic in the face of his repeated violations. He would draw blood with that knotted staff of his, but after the fact you would simply deny any knowledge of the injury to the school nurse. "I thought it was his blood, not mine," you would say, hoping the Father was lurking outside the station in the hallway. This wasn't courage so much as defiance born of a black and contracted hate. You weren't a tough guy deep down. Perhaps given the right circumstances you would admit this. But in places like this they turned you into a thug against your will. They were deeply perverse in that regard. Their rhetoric argued against the process of criminalizing youth. But their true motives were mysterious to you as any other adult practice in this life, absent of an explanation up front.

The only other advice the young man had for you while delivering his package was not to look around or make eye contact, especially with a cop, until the delivery was made. These words weren't necessary as you had grown to hate and fear cops over your years in detention. Routinely they would pay visits to Father Cancer's school with the intention to terrorize those students on the verge of being granted freedom. It didn't register with you how anybody would ever

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think a police officer a benign figure. You had learned to spot them from a distance. Even before coming to the school, you had fled when they were near.

When you returned to the dorm several hours later, it was twenty minutes past evening meal. Students were on their bunks staring into space.

"Long after dark," Frank Hackney noted to you, momentarily looking up from an experiment with matches he was executing sitting Indian-style on his blanket. "I think you're losing your touch or something," he said to you. "I think you never had much of a touch to begin with."

Frank lighted a match and placed it perpendicularly over the top of a second match. He was trying to illicit a domino effect of flame here. No luck thus far as this package was a gathering of soggy duds but he was trying. He was building up to something that he would attempt to execute months later with a series of handmade torches. He would go to the gymnasium to try to get one torch to be lit off another. Did it for a laugh and he would report limited success in this endeavor up until the moment that the fire department came with an arson inspector. By then Frank would be back in bed desperately trying to remove the scent of butane from his hands. Hadn't thought of everything in this caper apparently. This would be the act that landed him in the home for incorrigible youth upstate.

Except for the two minutes the drop off had occurred, an uneventful two hours had passed. So you made the decision not to tell Frank precisely.

"I got new friends," you said to Frank, imitating the cadences of the young man. Not that he made much of an impression on you, but it seemed somehow appropriate for the moment. You were telling Frank about your new friends in the voice of one of them. You were trying to barge your way into the world of adults simply by mimicking one of them.

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"Anybody miss me?" you asked him.

Frank Hackney shook his head.

"Nobody here would miss you," he said, "but that don't mean they didn't know you're gone and are out to flay pieces of you off and put 'em in a box for you later like it's your birthday."

Momentarily the image Frank was conjuring flashed in your mind. You thought: *did I make a mistake coming back?*

"Let em come get me then," you said to Frank loudly enough for others to hear. "Let Cancer drag me into the empty dorm and stick his cock in my ass. Which is what he wanted to do ever since laying eyes on luscious me."

Deep into his experiments, Frank didn't react to this as he otherwise might have.

"We're getting a TV," he said to you matter-of-factly several minutes later conveying Father Cancer's big announcement at the evening meal. "I mean for the common room," he said. "It's going to be in there. So that we can be more prayerful, more hard-headed, more patriotically-inclined," he said. "We're getting a big TV. He said it's going to be on between the hours of seven thirty pm and nine pm, just after the evening mass has been completed. He said it's going to be tuned strictly to programming dictating the need for personal reformation, for turning toward Christ and away from temptation like you would see maybe on *77 Sunset Strip*."

According to Frank Hackney, every kindness around here came with strings attached so you shouldn't be so impressed. Himself, he had no intention of watching so much as a minute. Couldn't stand the tube and its blanched and chattering heads that were portrayed. He never saw what others saw in it.

"They've merely gauged the temper of the times," he said to you briefly elated that three matches had been compelled to light exclusively. "I don't think this comes from the diocese

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personally, this kindness toward the forms," he said. "Maybe it's from the overseeing state. They're nervous about something regarding the treatment of the students suddenly. Maybe a lawsuit or something else is in the process of being lodged. Maybe the crime rate's up and they're under pressure to show results."

Even as Frank spoke, a technician was on the rooftop securing the antenna to the old smokestack. Eventually they would be able to receive twelve channels simultaneously. According to the Father, the TV would be secured in a cage which would only allow the school's staff to either turn the set on or change the channel. They were setting up a system of rewards and punishments for the whole system. They were trying to control the boys through more than beatings suddenly. These had likely been judged ineffective by some pointy-headed shrink who had visited the school on the sly and had written a deeply negative report.

"Father don't care if you criticize his methods none," Frank said and returned to his game one last time. He thought for some reason he could have success if the matches had been placed at a diagonal angle rather than at ninety degrees. The real problem for him was that this package was months old. He had been carrying them around with him in his front pocket all the while. The sweat and the pressure and the moisture had rendered them completely ineffective presently. But somehow realizing this didn't dissuade him slightly.

Indeed, it was impossible to imagine Father Cancer being swayed from his methods merely through the aegis of the state. Likely his bishop would have needed to have gotten into the act merely to stay his hand. Father Cancer had this terminal vision of Christianity that began and ended with the knotted stick. He thought the more violence was directed towards these delinquents, the more they could be made to understand.

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Television especially would not be the cure he would recommend, much less allowed, as a corrective to the corruption dwelling within his charges.

"He says it's made by Jews. But still," Frank told you about the fare that the boys would be allowed to watch nightly for two hours in exchange for a significant amount of adherence to the rules. "He gave a list: *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, Ed Sullivan," Hackney said, "before making clear to us all that these shows were all made by Jews. Ed Sullivan, he's a Jew," Frank said. "James Arness, Father said, "he's a Jew too."

A boy's sobbing in the corner of the dorm distracted you slightly before you thought up something else to say to keep the conversation going.

You thought: *Dick Van Dyke is Jewish?*

Well, maybe. But who gave a damn if he was? You thought the only television worth watching was the local evening news. And this was only to ascertain if it was going to rain the next day. Apart from somebody else's smuggled in comics, you didn't have any culture in your life at all. The books they assigned you in English class for the most part you never read. You never saw the point of their being perused. You didn't detect a single relic of wisdom existing in their language's silent catacombs and dead ends.

"*Find the Western path/right through the gates of wrath,*" the key cutter in the back of the hardware store to whom you had been directed to hand the hidden package to had told you in a friendly way upon seeing you standing in the doorway. A bardolater for the most part, according to him, nevertheless, he was not above the quoting of William Blake when it seemed apropos. He had a PhD in English literature from Michigan State University. But presently he was busying himself cutting keys for store clientele.

The key cutter was far cleverer than were those that assessed him negatively due to his low status. He knew

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exactly what life was about. And if he liked you, he would tell you exactly all about it, emasculate you with wisdom so to speak. He was self-satisfied in a way that belied his scrofulous appearance. His glasses were grimy and positioned halfway down his nose. And he was fat like an over-inflated cartoon animal in a Thanksgiving Day parade.

There were dozens of eight by ten glossy photographs inside the packages that you handed over. These displayed naked children, girls and boys, caught in strange poses. Sometimes naked adults were with the children in the photos. Mostly the children were by themselves. They uniformly wore masks over their faces likely to forestall the possibility of any of them being recognized by a schoolteacher or another authority figure that might be in a position to investigate the photos' origins.

"Well," the erudite key cutter said to himself, thumbing through each one as if inspecting for quality. "It's fine," he said to himself. "Yes. It's all fine. It's all in line with what he had expected."

He put the photos back into the thick envelope they arrived in.

"Is there anything else," he said to you when he saw you lingering around his desk. "Is there something else you require from me?"

You shook your head. Then he asked you to recall the bit of verse he had just spoken to you and cogitate on its meaning.

"All the great poets are centuries dead," the key cutter told you and glanced toward the store's front desk warily. "There's nothing certainly that's been produced in this century worth reading. Which was why we need to cherish the past so forthrightly. It's all we have left of civilization," he said. "The flickering flame. It's the only thing we have to cling to as the world progressively darkens."

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Presently you did not know enough to either agree or disagree with this sentiment. Merely he had spoken it you so forthrightly that you assumed that it was true. You couldn't imagine somebody saying something so dark that it turned out to be mere fancy on his part. So you assumed the key cutter had insider knowledge on this subject of cultural decline. Just like Blake's poetry, you assumed he had studied the subject in detail before speaking of it to you in the gravest manner possible. To him, cultural heat death was an accepted fact. And because he thought this way, to you it became accepted fact as well.

(In your last days in 2000 in a rehabilitation center in Jersey City, you would recall this meeting with the key cutter vividly. You would recall all that he had to say to you and the way you had to say it.

"All the great poets are centuries dead," you would say to a center orderly, one Maurice Combs, when asked by him why it is apparently you have given up. The line would resonate with you now just as it had back then. Even though you still weren't expressly sure what the words signified. They would seem profound to you merely though somewhat meaningless.

You would believe that if you hadn't said them a moment for truth-speaking would gone for good.

"What is that noise?" you would want to know of Combs hearing something akin to a constant drip coming through the static of your impairment.

Maurice Combs would lean over you and claim that he did not know. He would rifle through your possessions and find a package of cigarettes. Then he would go outside and smoke each one in turn. And in the interim you would be dead.)

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III.

It was another seven months before you saw the young man again. He was bouncing a handball against the doorframe of a Cadillac that did not belong to him.

"Moving up in the world," he said to you, noting your coat and the plaid clip-on tie that they made you wear always outside school grounds. The tire shop you worked at was a half mile from the reform school. Once there, you would hang your coat up in the back and place the clip-on tie in one pocket. They had a coat of their own that they wanted you to wear. Your days would be spent out on the shop floor mopping up oil stains and staring out the joint's grimy windows into the parking lot beyond.

Slowly they were molding you into an image of themselves, making you ready for a lifetime full of similar assignments such as this.

"You like your job, I'm sure absolutely," the young man said to you without making eye contact. "Else, why would you go about it so nicely? You're a sheep, always have been. And the secret to your happiness is that you can admit it," he said. "It's good that they don't pump you full of dreams. You'll take what they give you willingly, believing it's the best that you can do for yourself."

No college boards for you certainly, even nearing graduation. On your behalf there was no attempt at all to divine scholastic aptitude.

On the other hand, a war was gathering force in an unknown country in Southeast Asia. In progressive stages, your participation was being sought.

"You going in the service?" the young man wanted to know of you. "They cut your time don't they for a two-year hitch. They let you graduate by the time you're sixteen."

In fact, you had already signed onto the Marines as of last week. The orientation or whatever it might be called was

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taking place today. You came to work today bearing an official note that would allow you to be excused.

The young man asked you how long you had until being shipped off to Basic.

"Four months exactly after today," you said to him. "That is, if I don't fuck up."

"Fuck-up. It ain't like you to do so," the young man said and bounced his ball a little harder. As it collided with the passenger-side door, little indentations were created in the door's exterior.

The only reason a wise guy like this young man would ever come around was that he wanted something from you. He had been waiting until he had a new assignment for you. Apparently, your former assignment had been impressive enough to merit further consideration from him.

"How's tricks anyway?" he said to you once the handball had skipped away and he had gone back to the alley to collect it. "How're you holding up to your beatings?"

You didn't know what answer would place you in good stead with him. So just for the moment you just kept your mouth shut.

The young man didn't see why anybody would want to make believe that all that went on in Father Cancer's school hadn't happened. Thus, he posed this question to you straight off.

"They tell me it's a mark against you to have been in reform school," you said. "They tell me there are certain financial advantages to never having had any contact with the criminal justice system."

Coming from you with your threatening demeanor and tough guy avowals, such sentiment rang hollow. Rather, you were spouting the company line in front of a relative stranger. You were keeping him at a distance to see what would come next.

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"You up for something else?" he asked you then he threw the handball away. Wasn't his to begin with, just like the Caddy he was bouncing it against. It was a spontaneous thing with him, this wanton destruction. He had no consideration of doing it ten seconds before it started.

Rather than answer him directly, you edged away looking for an open storefront to run into. You weren't up for something as it turned out. And this surprised you as much as it would him once he found out.

Aside from the jacket and plaid tie, the only other object in your possession that he found worthy of conversing to you about was the Penguin Library *Portable Blake* tucked under one seersucker clad arm.

"Only faggots like poetry," the young man told you matter-of-factly as if it was an assertion beyond questioning. He offered you a cigarette. "You still got guts though, ain't ya," he said. "You're still up for anything with a payout at the other end."

At work at the tire shop, there was a punch card you were assigned. This tracked your comings and goings scrupulously.

"Takes one to know one," you said then wondered if a pay phone was nearby. Somebody, not a friend precisely but an acquaintance at the shop could be convinced to punch in for him. As you had done the same for them on several occasions during the past few months. And you were now approaching your sixteenth birthday as a large and threatening sort. You had quick hands and a coldness to your psyche that enabled violent proclivities. You could merely look at other boys nowadays and they would be afraid of you. You could not say with definite certainty whether that was your intention. You were still too young to know your own motives with that level of certainty.

Surmising the young man in front of you now, you noticed he had on a different pair of cowboy boots than those

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he wore the time before. In this version, the bronco had stomped the prone cowboy to death. Presently there were x's for the cowboy's eyes and a halo in red stitching where his Stetson used to be.

"How do you think everything went," he asked you, "with the other job? What did you make of the guy you gave the package to?"

Unbeknownst to either this young man or the key cutter to whom he was delivering the package, just outside the hardware store you had taken six of the images off the top and shoved them into your coat pocket. Presently they were stuffed inside your mattress in a crevice that you had torn there years back. You assumed nobody would miss these few. Even though you hadn't checked if the exact number was known.

"Find the Western path/right through the gates of wrath," the young man with the cowboy boots told you, repeating the Blake couplet. "Is that what he told you when you showed up? Is that what he said to you when you handed the package over?"

You were about to say you didn't remember what exactly. But then you remembered the Blake compendium in your possession. Maybe this greasy cowboy was smarter than he looked and was baiting you. Maybe he had already connected the dots for himself and was already circling so to speak to fuck with you as he saw fit.

You told him that the couplet sounded familiar enough, but you couldn't remember from exactly where. Then you asked him for a cigarette. You asked him if this bit of poetry was in fact some kind of code.

"We paid him a visit two days after you came," the young man said. *"Take the Western path/through the gates of wrath.* It's all he kept squawking as we put a blowtorch to his eyes."

According to him, this key cutter was a pervert who got exactly what he deserved. But the meaning from the lines of

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Blake's *Daybreak* were proving as elusive to him as the roots of the man perversion. He was at this point only vaguely interested in what they might mean or why they were spoken. He had no desire or ability to investigate by himself.

He thought they might have referred to something the key cutter explained to you in your visit. Maybe it was the case that you were the ones who spoke these words to him.

"We fucked him up good before he had the chance to squawk," he told you. "If you woulda known what was in that package, you would have wanted in on that action too," the young man told you.

He told you that this matter was over anyway. He said that another not unrelated adventure was about to begin.

"You go and throw that book in the fucking garbage," he said to you pointing at the Penguin Blake, "and then we'll take a ride. Nobody with a book of poetry in his pocket is worth a damn in a fight," he said. "People see with you with that stuff and they get the wrong idea about you and your masculinity."

You told the young man that there was a dumpster in the back alley of the storefront they were in front of.

"Here's to another great adventure," you said to the young man standing in this butcher shop's storefront, in imitation of Clayton Moore's Lone Ranger, which was one of the few television shows you had watched thus far on the school's TV. It made no discernable impression on you, despicable and disposable as it was, but it connected you with other people in some crucial way. It seemed to have resonance with other boys your age. Or maybe the Lone Ranger was only intended for small children and imbeciles. Which would explain a great deal about the way you felt about it.

Once in the back alley, you hopped the wooden fence placed between it and the next street over. You sprinted down the block the opposite way of where you were expected.

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("It was just something I felt the need to do," you told Combs the orderly when relating this story to him decades later. "Because who knew if I would make it back from wherever he was taking me? He was goddamned crazy with those cowboy boots and slicked back hair. And I stole from him. I had evidence against him. So, I would have been a damn fool for wanting to find out first-hand about real human nature. And the fact that he didn't like William Blake gave me the willies, too. He was a soulless type of individual. I could see this straight off.")

The stolen photos held no allure for you, not in the way they were intended to be alluring, anyway. Nevertheless, you felt the need to possess some of them regardless. The reason why was completely unknown to you. You had larceny in your heart in those days. You felt the need to steal far more than possessing that which was stolen. You felt you were entitled to take that which was not offered to you as recompense for a basic slave-like existence.

Apart from engendering the wrath of the hoodlum from who you had stolen, the larger problem for you was that the images' disposal could potentially be as dangerous as their continued possession.

"Girl with her eyes closed wearing a type of comic book mask," you said to the seer-suckered man next to you at the bar that you had wandered into after ten minutes of continuous running. Now you wanted to be where company was. You wanted to be within sprinting distance of a phone so you could be pretending to call an authority figure if the young man made an appearance. You were through with him. And because you had run, you assumed he was through with you. It would be a brief conversation if you ever ran into him again. Likely he would be reaching into his boot heel quickly in search of his renowned knife.

The seer-suckered man looked you over balefully when the photos' contents started to be related by you.

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"She was up on one leg like a ballerina," you said to him. "And the guy who was behind her was bent over with his face buried in her neck."

Basic wisdom forbade further discussion of this image with any detail. But just then you didn't have anything else to talk about. You were sweaty and suspicious-looking, hugging the walls in a workingman's bar. So, you felt compelled to talk about what was on your mind albeit in a vague enough way (you thought) so as not incriminate yourself. For example, these photos had been spied by you across somebody's shoulder merely. They didn't belong to you. You couldn't have said where they had come from if you were offered a million dollars to do so. It was a mystery to you where they were from. You were simply telling a tale.

The man you were talking to had a face like the surface of a bog just after the dredge cannons had been fired. Non-descript objects would rise to its surface every so often if only to sink back down under its own dead weight seconds later. He seemed neither bored nor excited by your confessions. Which provided you with the impetus to continue. He had somebody with the air of a deep, negative experience. He was non-judgmental because the concept of judgment was found by him to be lacking. Which was to say, awful things could be said to him in confidence without fear of reprisal.

The mask that the nine-year-old girl wore was actually a gauzy veil that obscured her from forehead to nose.

"They didn't want nobody to see who she was," you told the man offering up your explanation for why she was wearing veil in the first place. They were likely terrified that her eyes would be used to identify her later. She likely had a very distinctive set of peepers, you thought, ones that when espied directly would have led to a notion of who she was. Somebody did not want anybody to know who she was. She could not be trusted to keep a secret.

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For hours on end you would stare through the photo's veil trying to get a good look at the eyes. You thought you were fated to be her rescuer. But over time you lost interest in this fantasy. You weren't a pervert like the key cutter. You didn't see her in a sexual way.

She was being penetrated from behind. The "o" that her tiny mouth had formed into seemed fake to you somehow, not merely its expression but the entire organ, as if it was a glued-on decal in the midst of peeling off.

"Men in this life are as creatures from the swamp," you told the seer-suckered barfly and sipped the draft that was drawn for you after averring to your adult status. "I told the person who owned these images to turn them over to the police and then pray. I told him that he should report everything he knew of them to the police and go beg forgiveness to all authority figures and await judgment. It is only fitting for such crimes, I told him. I said your silence will only be making it worse for yourself in this life and the one after."

*To find the Western path,
Right through the Gates of Wrath
I urge my way;
Sweet Mercy leads me on
With soft repentant moan:
I see the break of day.*

*The war of swords and spears,
Melted by dewy tears,
Exhales on high;
The Sun is freed from fears,
And with soft grateful tears
Ascends the sky*

On the bar's TV, the boob tube, Jack Ruby's murder of Lee Harvey Oswald was being re-played constantly as if to capture and disabuse the myth that some minor yet telling

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piece of information concerning the monumental event had not already been captured, analyzed, and discounted by the great army of television commentators who had been on the air non-stop since it had occurred twelve hours ago.

"If you ask me, he got what he deserved," the seer-suckered man next to you said. "Nigger lover and a Commie symp. To boot."

Briefly you wanted to know who he was talking about exactly. Kennedy, or Oswald? Soon you deduced, if only by the tenor of his voice, that he was referring to both men at once.

"If he was dying on the street in front of me, I wouldn't so much as bother walking around him," the man said of this imaginary Kennedy/Oswald conjoining. "No, he got what he deserved," the man said, "but only in a secondhand way. They should have had a proper trial for him just before the execution taken place," he said. "There are certain legal points that needed to be observed regardless. Which was not to say we are mournful about the outcome," he said. "What's dead is dead anyway. It's better than the alternative. Which is continued health and prosperity for those who are enemies of freedom," he said. "It beats the hell out of life in a totalitarian state."

Considering his comments, the length of frayed rope in the man's jacket pocket seemed to hold a deeper meaning suddenly.

"You look at Oswald's face just as he's getting plugged," the man said to you, "it looks like he's about to start to cry and sing right there. He never saw it coming certainly," he said. "You can see it in his face. He probably never knew what happened to him until he was lying there on the pavement with that prison guard staring down at him."

Nobody around this bar certainly held any sympathy for either Oswald or Kennedy and you, being underage, weren't going to offer a note of sympathy for either man. Though you

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did feel a tinge of regret for the widow Kennedy and the burden of having to raise two young children on her own. At the televised state funeral earlier that week that they let you out of your sweeping duties to watch, you were almost mesmerized by the mournful sight of the beautiful woman in the black veil vaguely reminiscent—and this connection was only made by you in the past few moments—of the naked girl in the picture. You didn't think the punishment fit the crime in her case. But you weren't about to stick up for her given the company you kept of late.

Back in the reform school, a bleary-eyed Arden Smith greeted you with the collar of his turtleneck pulled up to the chin as if to disguise a hickey.

"My absence from school this week is self-explanatory given current events," he said to you, no doubt referring to the president's assassination. But you had not even been aware he was missing. Like so many others, he had passed from your life already while still in your presence. You were ignorant of his travails or his political views. You assumed, likely incorrectly, that he thought the same of you.

The reason he was standing here at the steps now was to inform you that Father Cancer had sought your company.

"He's not having such a good time of it of late," he said to you. "We've all been hurt so much by what happened," he said. "But for some reason he's taking it especially hard."

An unofficial Pallottine with a fondness for whiskey and the lash, Canner apparently saw the loss of JFK as the loss of kin.

"He's beside himself even though he won't let on directly," Mr. Smith said to you speaking to you as if you were his best friend. Internally you suggested that he climb the bell tower on the adjacent church and throw himself off. No better cure for despair than the anodyne of the grave, after all. The Father, if he was in better spirits, might beg to differ. Nevertheless, you were certain of your prescription for him. If

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he asked you, he would tell you the same. So, you thought presently you were untouchable. He lacked the ability to bully you anymore.

Nowadays you were a hard-core felon who answered only to your own conscience

"Give him my condolences," you said to Mr. Smith and tried to push past him.

You were out of here in a few months regardless despite whatever machinations the Father indulged in.

"He wants to see you," Smith said. "He's eager to know about what you think of this mess the world has gotten itself into of late."

"I think," you said to him, "I think Lee Harvey Oswald is a better shot with his rifle than you are with that damned hunting bow."

There on the wall behind Arden on the corkboard where once had stood a collage of smiling young boys hunched over glistening machines now stood a giant colored map of Southeast Asia.

"Who can tell me about the peninsular nation of Vietnam," a voice you had never heard before boomed from the gymnasium. "*Vie-et-nam*. Who can tell me why I'm talking about it now?"

You didn't think you had missed anything just then. You turned to Arden Smith to search for an answer. Nothing there in his face but a sorrowful resignation. His face had gone bleary temporarily from too much crying.

And there was blood on his upturned collar from some gentle animal that he slain then wept over with his sons behind him. Wondering what the goddamned point was for them all along.

1968: The Great Red Dragon

I.

By age twenty you were nearly finished with the army, finished with The Big Red One. You were a four-year veteran of the police action in Vietnam and dead inside. Over There they hadn't given you any sort of break. They hadn't given a shit about what condition your brains were in because of all that you had seen and done.

If only to preserve their sense of themselves as compassionate men, your superiors had rotated you back stateside in 1968. Presently you had three months to go on your original double-decker commitment. Something subtle and divine had been diminished inside of you by then. You saw the world as a hopeless thing presently, as a type of hideous sea monster washed up on a barren beach being picked at by verminous birds.

In dreams sometimes you approached this monster's corpse and stared into its single unblinking eye. You wanted to see yourself in the same way that it saw you. You wanted to live through it fantastically if only to understand the reasons behind its cruelty.

"I'm a victim of heinous actions perpetrated by men without souls," you liked to say often enough to your patrol partner, Bill Gladd, when walking the dreary halls of USP Leavenworth federal penitentiary where they had stationed you, in lieu of a psychiatric commitment, with six months to go on your hitch. "Yes," you told Gladd on this occasion "a goddamned suffering innocent. That's me. It's been that way ever since I can remember," you told him. "It's been that way ever since I drew breath into my lungs after a doctor slapped me on the ass for holding it in."

You told Bill you had been put-upon ever since, and that he should feel sorry for you without ironic detachment.

"Because of my suffering I don't feel the need to apologize for my actions ever," you told him. "I don't think I'm in the wrong about anything nowadays. I don't see anything I do as having much to do with me at all."

Taking pulls of the corn liquor you had poured into a flask before this shift's commencement, you were at pains suddenly to recall the precipitating event behind this latest outburst of self-pity. You assumed it would re-introduce itself to you eventually. You assumed somehow the gravity of your own unhappiness was too great to allow a single terrible experience to gain escape velocity. Eventually the memory would re-appear along one horizon line. And then it would be as if you never had forgotten about it.

This corn liquor was a specialty of this part of eastern Kansas where apparently there was nothing better for natives to do but maintain stills in their backyards like other Americans maintained swing sets.

"Nothing wrong with me that a little hooch can't fix," you said to Gladd and spat upon a stained concrete wall. This was USP Leavenworth's infamous "black wall" that years from now would be the subject of a famous *60 Minutes* investigation. The techniques of prison control being practiced at USP Leavenworth were too close to torture to be

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tolerated by good government types in the media. Such scolds generally didn't take well to the retributive theories of justice and reform practiced in this penitentiary by so many shell-shocked and largely unregulated MP's of which you were one of the more menacing presently. They couldn't cotton to the image of their fellow Americans, most of them black, stripped naked and chained to the twenty-foot structure for hours at a time. It didn't register with them as an action that a "good" nation should undertake. Or maybe some of them merely didn't see the point of it. They thought it was violence for violence's sake.

(By the time the *60 Minutes* report aired, you would be years removed from USP Leavenworth in northern Michigan. You would admit shock to your common law wife, Maxine, at what was being presented therein, about the wall and otherwise. "Fuckers wouldn't know a real American from a piece of shit floating in their toilet," you would tell Maxine and take a swig from the same flask you were swigging from while on duty. Instead of corn liquor this flask would contain Wild Turkey bought from a state store in Ishpeming. Just because you were drunk at the time didn't alter your perspicacity. If anything, you thought you were being too kind to them, the Fuckers on TV. Generally, when you sobered up was when the real hateful sentiments started to flow from you in earnest.)

To Gladd, you pointed out that your presently miserable state was because of the actions of others solitarily. Therefore, nobody had the right to question you about your dark moods.

"The dreams I have can be dissected many ways in the manner of a laboratory frog," you said to Gladd after punch-in at the number nine clock station. This was what the brass made you do, punch-in every twenty minutes of your shift at different time clocks. They wanted to make sure you were walking on the right path at all times during patrol. They didn't have clocks out in the Vietnamese jungle else they

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would have made you punch-in there too. They didn't care really what you saw and if order was even being kept. They wanted you there rather as a physical presence. They were addicts of punctuality. This was as much as they could expect from a beast like you.

You thought you and them both needed psychiatric care. But the fact that it never was offered (at least to you) seemed to argue against you ruminating on its absence. Such deference to authority was ingrained in you to such a point that it was executed unconsciously. Superficially you didn't believe there was anything wrong with you because they wouldn't admit that there was. The more violent you became, the more you became convinced that whoever you were being violent toward had had it coming. Your actions merely were a confirmation about the guilt of others.

The shrinks who were supposed to be taking care of you were agnostic about this subject. The entire notion of guilt or blame or moral judgment had been banished from their lexicon around the 1920s. Their approach to mental health was entirely utilitarian, assuming as an end goal a soldier capable of firing a gun at a person judged by military intelligence to be an enemy. Thus far you had passed the test with flying colors. You had been a good soldier up until now. Up until the time of your court martial, you would continue to be a good soldier. At which point the paperwork would shift in your disfavor like the tailwind in advance of an approaching front. And by degrees the shrinks would start to conceive of you as a monster.

Bill Gladd too had dreams but of an altogether different consistency than yours.

"Pull 'em down and put 'em up," he told you mimicking with one fist the piston-ing motion of a cock into a female ass. "Over There," he told you, reverting to his favorite subject, *Over There*, "I got my fill. A lot of guys did. Well, in a way I was sorry to leave. But they told me to leave one day so I left.

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They told me I had had my fill and I believed them. Against my better judgment I believed them. I could have gone AWOL or defected," he told you. "I could have found a VC commander to surrender to like in some hippie fantasy about how the war will end. You surrender to them and they surrender to you and you both cry and hug and then that's the end of war."

The preposterousness of Gladd surrendering to a VC and being allowed to live amongst them as an honored guest was absurd to contemplate for anybody who had been in the shit for long enough to divine the insurgency's true nature by the body count accrued in their wake.

"We were out in patrol once somewhere in country and we encountered what used to be a friendly gook village," you said to Gladd as an answer to his idyll about forging a separate peace. "They don't fuck around, the VC," you said to him. "Which is why they're likely to win this war. I mean they just don't even pretend like they're civilized."

You told the familiar story about the pile of children's arms encountered in the village's center each with a band-aid on it from where the occidental doctor with his vaccines had visited only hours before.

"Don't know if it's true, my friend," you admitted to Gladd and took a little while to lean against a non-descript concrete barricade for support. Half-drunk as you were now, it was genuinely hard to sort out genuine experience from garden variety hearsay. You thought you had seen this while out on patrol but couldn't really be sure now. Back then, you were stoned and now you were half-drunk. And reality warped at the edges in the midst of a war zone. It might well be that this was a story you heard while out on patrol. Or maybe there was a pile of sticks in the village square and this was the story you invented about your enemy as a type of counter-propaganda against them.

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Ignore the prickly journalistic details about exactly what happened but his point was still valid. VC didn't allow for American deserters in the society they were attempting to build, you thought. And if Bill Gladd doubted this was the case, he should just get on a plane back there at the nearest opportunity and try.

"I'd give you maybe ten fucking minutes," you told him, "before you admit that this was all a mistake and beg them for repatriation."

"The difference between you and me," Gladd said to you, "is one of us is prepared for Armageddon and one is not. I got shit running around my brain that you've never thought of in a million years. Ain't so worried over what will happen next, unlike you. Cause I already know to a great degree. And I already have what I'm about to do figured out before I venture in."

Bill Gladd stopped to reaffix his maple wood nightstick that had been slapping against his thigh as he walked. With him it was always an impediment. Something was either wrong with his belt or his body in this regard. He was constantly having to stop and reaffix his nightstick.

His plan for re-insinuating himself into the flesh pits of Vietnam was a lengthy one that would not be enacted until the war ended completely.

"Just sit on my ass and wait until the hostilities cease," he told you, estimating that the war could go on another ten years easily if cooler heads could not prevail. He told you that all wars end, if only because one side would run out of bullets before the other side. Wars always ended with one side being overwhelmed by the other. There is no such thing as peaceful co-existence as it is conceptualized in the public imagination. Exhaustion giving birth to passivity giving birth to subjugation was far more common than any enlightened stance of non-violence. Like you, Bill thought America was bound to lose this war simply because this truth was not being

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recognized by it. The VC by contrast had taken this message to heart. They were prepared to sacrifice their last man for their cause. They didn't have any illusions about the sort of negotiated settlement that stateside peaceniks were proffering routinely through the media as if the Vietnam War was a dispute over the price of a home and could be submitted to arbitration at any point.

The slope mind, according to Bill Gladd, was completely in lockstep with the slope imagination. This made for a non-conflicted, therefore, relentless killing machine in perpetuity. No way to beat these devils short of deployment of the Bomb. But, you see, Americans were so weak-willed that this option was never in serious play. Think of the astronomical half-life's of whole cities on this continent if Hanoi should acquire the bomb. The North Vietnamese didn't believe in stalemates or negotiated solutions. And so there was little reason to think the conflict would ever end in any way short of North Vietnam's conquering of the south.

Bill's plan was to simply avoid the conflict altogether until the point that he could return safely without fear of retribution. Vietnam would need able-bodied men of all sorts as the War would have taken the better part of the male population by the time hostilities ceased. He could go back and likely be anything he wanted. He would be the object of some outrage but also likely dewy-eyed nostalgia. So many people would have had it better in the times before the outbreak of hostilities. He would remind them of the nation's golden age likely. He would do his best to play up the fact that he had nothing to do with the conflict of the previous decade. He would deny his American army history completely. No one in the country would have his service record to gainsay the contention.

He wanted to be a Vietnamese pimp of the straw hat wearing colonial variety. He had always imagined this type had trolled the streets of Saigon in a white linen suit with a

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perfumed handkerchief in his right hand to dab at his sweaty brow.

"Slope pussies are different from American girls," Gladd told you, explaining that he could never last more than ten seconds in a Vietnamese twat before giving up the ghost as it were and depositing his genetic code into them. They were tight and supple and they milked you from first penetration like a handmaid milked a cow. They had no regard for sexual limitations either. They were completely perverse and degraded in advance of your efforts to degrade them. Perfect whores as Bill saw them. They'd stick their finger into your asshole without being asked. You'd cum on their face and they'd smile and lick their lips. You'd shotgun their ass and they'd say nothing in protest and just moan. So different than the way it is back home. Here, the goddamn whores have so many rules in advance. They're like goddamn civil servants in the way they talk to you almost like you're their bitch and not the other way around.

Gladd thought, if only because of the pussy, eventually Vietnam would become an open western-friendly principality just like Singapore. It's the Asian twat that proved irresistible to western man. It's like nirvana being inside one of these girls, he testified. The war was finally too much of a burden to assume for men as the price to pay was banishment from Vietnam's brothels and saloons.

He thought the only reason for a man to go anywhere generally was to have his dick sucked. This was life's apotheosis, according to Gladd. The only reason to go on.

"Everything that there is for you to see you have already seen on TV," he told you elaborating upon his theory. "In the future, maybe five years from now, sex tourism will be the only tourism that will make any money," Bill Gladd said to you. "My idea is to be there waiting when it happens," he said. "I'm a pimp now but when I retire the nations of the world will give me a fucking award. If you're able to make

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enough money they'll call you something else other than what you really are. They'll give ya a fuckin award and not remember why it is they hated you to begin with. Cause now you're rich like them. And they've run out of bad names to throw at you."

Gladd thought certainly this was the way of the world. His experience was such that he felt that if he was simply cunning enough, he would be allowed to take advantage of his fellows' ignorance forever. It had been this way in the Vietnam-era army where graft and dope dealing had seemed a way of life. He had not known the army before Vietnam. He assumed this was the way it had always been.

Army life to him seemed a kind of absurd television program where he was being forced to pull his lines from out of thin air. Eventually he would know something that the TV people didn't. And as a result, the tables would be turned on them for good.

In Vietnam, prostitution was an acceptable profession. At least it appeared that way from outside. A hooker was far more respected than an officer of the law.

"I had some run-ins over there with the self-appointed slope beat cops," Gladd told you, recalling his days as a Saigon stationed pool mechanic. "Just like over here," he said. "Apparently they are reading from the same cop hymnal internationally. They gotta get in your face for matters which are none of their fucking business. I had my dick out on a single occasion," he recalled. "I was walking around with it out as a kind of fucking joke. See? Why they had to run me, a savior of their country, in for that I'll never know. If I live to be one hundred and seven, I'll never forgive them for this."

"He seemed truly outraged, the slope cop that pinched me," Bill said. "He seemed angry that I should be in such a state in his country. I told him the usual," he said. "Which was that me and my friends were over here in his malaria-infested shithole dying on his account. I told him that as my

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punishment I should be deported from the country never to return again."

The thing about Gladd's nightstick, the reason it always was requiring readjustment, was that a piece of it was broken off at one end enough to cause a poor fit within its customized loop.

"Fucker's gonna get his surely," Gladd said of one dagger-staring inmate.

He banged on an iron bar with the stick. This was how it had managed to have been broken. Bill had an easefulness about his belligerence that you admired greatly. His abusiveness towards others was seldom forced. It was always the result of an extended inquisition about another person's *compos mentis* in which the answers weren't to his liking.

Like you, he felt the world owed him. And he was justified, therefore, in doing unto others as he wished. Sometimes it was an iron prison bar that his maple wood nightstick intersected with, sometimes it was with another man's cranium.

He wasn't as receptive to the differences of the surfaces that the nightstick encountered as he likely needed to be to avoid that Section 8 discharge he was being considered for against his wishes.

MP duty at USP Leavenworth was where they assigned the war's defectives. To be declared unfit for that likely meant you were unfit to function in ordinary society. Nobody would consider the granting of a Section 8 from a stateside post to be any sort of realization of a successful dodge. The official discharge for nutcases was to be designated as "Undesirable." Such a categorization could haunt a man in his future endeavors. They made you for a fruit loop automatically when you had that designation hanging over you. Even a Vietnamese-based pimp of the sort Gladd imagined himself bound for must have been in possession of some manner of *bona fides*, if only to regain entrance into the country. Faggots

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they didn't like over there any more than any other part of the world.

Regardless, he had shown no attempt to tone down his act. The problem Bill had with the army stemmed from his being a full-blown psychopath. Subsequent psychiatrists at subsequent institutions nearly as grim as USP Leavenworth would confirm the same over the span of decades. Bill would die in a prison for the criminally insane on the outskirts of Fairbanks, Alaska in 1982. Helluva view of Mt. Denali from his barred window, that's all you could say of the place. He never would have a visitor over the entire span of his incarceration. (Sometimes in the 1970's you would mail a letter to him devoid of return address. You didn't want to engage Gladd really. You simply wanted him to know that you wanted him to remain alive.)

The way you fuck a Vietnamese whore properly, Gladd was saying, was to strangle her until she lost consciousness. At which point you could use her as a fleshy doll bending her in any position you want to for as long as she remains knocked out.

"The advantage of your ordinary Asian cocksucker," Bill said to you queuing up at the time clock in this block's vestibule, "is her lightness of bearing in comparison to her American counterpart. Whereas your common American cow by age thirty sports an impressive gut and cannot be (short of a Charles Atlas level of fitness) hoisted above you then subsequently dropped on her cranium until the blood flows out of her ears, your typical Asian whore is light as a feather. When you drop them, they bleed by-and-large in torrents. There is thus something altogether more interesting for you to talk about than the ordinary mysteries of sex, the common mechanics of penetration and ejaculation until satiety is achieved."

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The way Gladd punched into this particular time clock was violent and exceptional. It drew your admiration even as it was drawing your superior's wrath.

"Kaboom," Bill said and punched down on the top lever with his crooked nightstick. He had already broken three of the ten clocks that they were required to submit their time into. He had already been written up twice by it in some furtive attempt to reign in his rambunctiousness.

Not that he had any real animus toward the clocks, or at least he wouldn't admit to any. Merely he was full of life. His minute to minute duties while serving as a military prison guard were proving too constricting for him. He didn't want to obey the rules, but they made him. To refuse would likely land you on the wrong side of the bars in USP Leavenworth. This was where so many court-martialed soldiers were warehoused. Some of them eventually would face a military firing squad if their crimes were deemed serious enough. Most would simply be held for an indeterminate amount of time and released into society on their own recognizance, supposedly reformed from their time spent in stir. Though nobody had devised a metric to tell if this was the case.

A good deal of them were deserters. Also, a fair share of intra-military drug dealers. Also, there was a murderer or three scattered throughout these blocks. They had had enough and "fragged" their C.O. These were the ones you and Gladd eventually sought out. They had interesting stories to tell. They were generally possessed of a fearless bearing.

To a man none of them were sorry about what they had done. They felt it was justifiable homicide, evidence of a kill-or-be-killed situation. Of course, their reasoning was fanciful at best. But you admired them because they lacked any real respect for the truth. They weren't slaves to the truth as were mere mortals. They were gods of a sort because they lied and lived the lie to its fullest. Lying, unlike truth-telling, was innately creative. The lie ferociously lived became the truth.

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Which was a godly sort of creativity. Most didn't see it that way necessarily, but you did. You admired psychos more than they admired themselves. Only a few of them were bound for the firing squad. You felt deeply that they had the ability to lie their way out of it. They could be reborn on the wings of their contempt for authority. If only they had wanted to.

If time permitted, you would write a book with yourself as the main character. The name you would call yourself in the book would be false. It would have nothing to do with you as a real person.

"Two middle fingers straight up the poop shoot," Bill said to you, showing you how it was done with his right hand. "Afterwards," he said, "you go to town on her clit with your tongue. At that point it's all over for her. She's a gal in love. Slap her around if you want to, you go right ahead. I ain't saying anything you do in this regard is right or wrong," he told you. "I ain't saying anything for or against the procedure at all."

A man like Bill Gladd needed to be respected you decided if only for the ferocity of his vision. And so, the notion occurred to you that this was all the universe was made of at root, the false perceptions of demented men.

Misunderstandings accrued over each other like layers of *papier-mâché* forming structures inadvertently. There was no real reason why the layers had come into existence. They simply were. You asked the men who were their progenitors and they would not know. Puppets of God we all were maybe. And, therefore, we were objectively blameless. Nobody around here really thought this was the case, least of all you. But it stood for you as one explanation amongst so many. This might be why Bill had always proved so charismatic to you. He was, in a real way, God. And love him or hate him, God could not be ignored.

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"Once," he said to you, "I took a hammer to a slope whore's skull and set her on fire while she was lying there in her own stink. I wanted to see if the flames would wake her up, which they did for a few seconds anyway. At a point, she gave up trying and curled up into a ball. I was disappointed for the most part at the fight she put up. It's like she gave up half-way through. It's like she was getting back at me by not giving me the satisfaction of watching a good show."

It could've been true. At that moment, you weren't set precisely on determining the veracity of the anecdote. Vietnam for both of you was long over. You would never go back there, even for a vacation. You would visit the place again only in your shallow dreams, the ones that the booze hadn't been able to eradicate completely, the ones where you weren't absolutely aware if you were actually dreaming.

A road that led into De Nang was torn up enough that your company had to abandon your jeep completely by the roadside to make it in. And then there was the incessant humidity, and the scent of gentle putrescence emanate from the rice paddies where apparently cow dung was used as fertilizer.

Always in the dream a child with its mouth sewn shut would appear from one of these paddies with a message seeming for you solitarily:

"Nh&n ra, nh&n ra! V&nh&n ma qu&t!"

You fuck up one time and that's what you get in return: enough of these non-dreaming dreams to last you until the end of your days. Well, you weren't the regretful type. An apology would not be forthcoming from you anytime soon.

"Nh&n ra, Nh&n ra!" But, of course, when you were in the middle of a dream it's easier said than done. The best that you could do in such situations was wait for it to end. Stare up at the bleak walls of this USP and take a slug of milky corn

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liquor. Anyway, do you think they cared if you drank on duty? How could they not know?

You were mere cattle awaiting your general discharge.

If it was offered, you would tell them to take their purple heart medal and stick it where the sun don't shine. No, not your style exactly, the donning of such trinkets. A smarter person would say nothing merely and blandly agree with their blandishments disguised as assessments. They would tell such a man to jump and he would ask how high. Merely.

II.

On the upper tier of Cell Block B, various handmade communist flags had been draped from outside of cells. They had been allowed to be displayed for the moment so as to forestall the orchestrated riot long in the works at USP Leavenworth. The war itself was going badly to judge by the best information available. The brass was desperate not to have what could be characterized by hostile media as an insurrection of military prisoners to put down. They were trying to ease their way out of this moment of crisis until a political solution could be reached regarding the war itself, as well as the thousands of deserters and draft dodgers clogging this prison's cells. Nobody wanted them here, least of all the military. Yet their ranks were growing daily as the war effort expanded and disillusionment amongst both enlisted soldiers and potential soldiers grew.

The most charismatic of the flag makers was a diminutive black man nicknamed Hung. He had come by this sobriquet, so it was alleged, because he once survived a lynching in his home state of Arkansas.

"Over there just by the Cookson Hills, ain't got no other name for the colored but *nigger*," Hung told you once as he took a pull of your Kansas corn liquor from a metal cup he had once placed between the bars to receive this libation from

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you. Traded you for it for a half a bar of the deep brown hash that had become, over Yankee cigarettes, the de facto currency in Leavenworth due to its sudden ubiquity and the fact that the capitalist culture of America was in profound disfavor amongst so many prison habitués right now. Around here, you asked a man after his political allegiance (which few men did) and they would either start quoting Mao or lob a wad of spit at your face for trying to blow a groove. To a man up here they considered themselves prisoners-of-conscience. That's all they called themselves night and day, regardless if they were polled for an answer: *me, a motherfucking prisoner of conscience!* A man like Hung who had cut up his C.O.'s face with a serrated tuna can lid was a motherfucking prisoner of conscience! Nobody here doubted he was goaded into the act by racism. Even the white prisoners around here flashed the black power salute. No Stokely Carmichael was around here to correct such men, to set them straight about their evil white souls. Such distinctions in cell block B were largely meaningless. Martin Luther King was still alive and organizing in Memphis. The tenor of prison life would change radically after his assassination.

According to Hung, half his life this was the name he answered to, far more so than his Christian name, Richard.

"Even the schoolteachers, the white preachers. Even the social service agents from the government office in Little Rock come up to Heber Springs to see that justice was done. Such crackers would look at you and speak the name matter-of-factly," Hung told you after the libation was poured. "Nigger, they'd say, y'all understand the notion I am here propigatin'? And nobody would be offended," Hung said. "Because that's the treatment we as a race thought we deserved. Sometimes, boy, as well, if you was a boy. We called ourselves *nigger* and *boy* because that's the name given to us. It isn't until you wind up in a place like this that the truth of the culture becomes known to you," Hung said. "No, your name is not boy or

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nigger or anything of the sort. You don't have a name really, being a black man in the United States. Until you think of one yourself. Once named, they don't have to call you by it, and you don't have to come when they don't. Eventually they get the message and stop trying."

The Kansas corn liquor Hung liked because it reminded him of the moonshine distilled by the niggers of Heber Springs.

"Need something else for your head besides hash all the live long day," Hung said to you taking an alarmingly large sip from his metal cup. The Arkansas moonshine was a hundred and sixty proof easily and needed to be imbibed slowly. To somebody like Hung, however, it was mere chardonnay. He wasn't being brave here as much as demonstrating for you the bitter wages of oppression. He was only three years older than you but would be in his grave by 1975. An unmarked piece of earth somewhere in a county gravesite. You could know the race of the inhabitants in this burial ground because only the crosses of white prisoners came with names. It wouldn't change until the mid-eighties when the whole cemetery was plowed under in favor of a Wal-Mart Supercenter. The march of progress, so to speak. But at this point certainly Hung would be beyond caring.

He thought that the best way to abide such a place was to resist its strictures profoundly. Being drunk and high much of the waking day was the best way that he knew how to do so. As when you are seriously smashed, boundaries physical or otherwise are seldom recognized.

"You fuck the man up his lily-white ass by getting yours," Hung told you, furtively holding out his cup for more. Such advice was obvious to you and you practiced it as much as the minor degree of prudence you possessed allowed. Unlike Hung, you still held out for a meaningful life beyond the walls of a given institution. You weren't about to go cut up your C.O. for instance for a minor insult to your dignity. Presently

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it didn't make sense for you to do so. Just as in reform school you were possessed of enough cunning to endure for the short term. You had a budding notion of yourself as an outdoorsman. This had been cultivated by recent trips out into the surrounding Kansas prairie. You wanted to be like many of the same pheasant hunters you bought your corn liquor from. There was a certain ease to their bearing that you associated with being free. They handled firearms casually. They seemed to be able to go where they wanted to, devoid of a self-consciousness that being raised in institutions engendered in people whether they were aware of the affect or not.

Unlike Hung, you were willing to wait several years before you got yours. You were drinking nowadays because you were bored, because the time up until your discharge wasn't proceeding as fast as you would have liked. You liked hanging out up here because you felt these men on the upper tier had had it worse than you. After all, in a brief while you would be allowed to leave on your own recognizance. You looked up to these men in an entirely ironic way. As if they were put upon school chums who you admired because of the avowed indifference in the face of doom. It was like your relationship with Frank Hackney all over again except these men weren't about to set fire to their cells just yet. They all had a notion that there was nothing they could do presently to improve their lot even slightly. Society had judged them and consigned them already. With some justification, they weren't hopeful enough to imagine for themselves a life outside of USP Leavenworth or places exactly like it.

The aspect of the corn liquor that tended to attract men to it — and this was something that Hung must have been aware of, if only due to the amount of it he imbibed — was its danger. Really it was a low-level poison that could kill if one was not properly respectful of its potency.

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"Knocked these here teeth out," Hung told you of the opaque brew presently in his cup while pointing to his lower jaw. He was claiming that the brew dissolved his gum line. And it might have been the case when used in tandem with the hash which was chock full of resins and not meant to be sampled orally. What Hung had taken to doing of late was scraping off the charred remains of the hash at the bottom of the aluminum foil he formed into a pipe to smoke it. He would stick the remains between his gums like you would a plug of chewing tobacco. It was an ancillary high, no more than a couple puffs on a Thai stick, but it would suffice. He would have swallowed the undifferentiated goddamn black mass entirely if doing so one hadn't made him violently ill. This USP Leavenworth hash was not pure hash. Such a product existed only in a man's imagination, found in a fantastic Khyber village where entire families made the stuff lovingly in wooden houses adjacent to their property in the same manner as the stills of Heber Springs, Arkansas.

As a boy, Hung would venture into a similar structure and suck at the moonshine dripping from the copper pipe like it was the last bit of clean water on the planet. This was just the run-off from the mash and its vileness was palpable to him even now while leaning against his wall of pornographic magazines whose covers comprised the only splash of color in the cell absent the pink ring of bacteria on the toilet bowl's interior that had been growing for the past few months.

"It don't matter what they do to you, if you do not allow yourself to feel it," Hung said to you as you nodded in ascension at this sentiment. The problem with corn liquor as opposed to hashish was that it tended to kick back at you after the taste was gone.

"If I was you," you said to Hung, "I'd take it easy with that mix until you can find something better to ease the pain of being alive. You get alcohol poisoning in here, you're as good as dead. We have been given this direction in our daily

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briefings. There's no official policy for inmate extraction due to overdose. Cause there's officially no drugs or alcohol on the premises. To have a policy for them would just be admitting defeat. You're supposed to be penitent in a penitentiary, see? You're supposed to have your Bibles open at all hours of the day and seeking God's and the United States forgiveness for the crimes you committed against them in their mutual War on Communism. You a fucking deadbeat or a fucking coward, something of the sort. Hung, that's why you're here. Ain't supposed to spend your days getting high and plotting revolution like maybe you were VC all along and infiltrated the army on a spy mission so as to bring it down from within."

Actually, the officer Hung had cut up with the tuna can had said nothing to him remotely derogatory. Hung didn't like his looks merely, his pink face was like an undercooked ham to him floating in its own grease.

So, he resolved to do something about it. And now here he was, literally rotting in stir.

Hung told you, "We got a weapons cache in these cells building up for the hour you crackers get what's coming to you."

"The fact that you're telling me about it, Hung," you said to him, "means you're fucking dumber than I thought you were. Which I didn't think was possible given the restrictions of our shared biology."

"When it all goes down you'll be thanking me for giving you that warning," Hung told you, and glanced at the tattoo on your left forearm. The drawing depicted the head of a six-point buck, sliced roughly at the neck, spreading a blood puddle in the direction of your left elbow. You had it created in a backroom of a bar in Saigon, underneath the watchful yet closed eyes of an orange-robed monk meditating on a fold-up table in the full lotus position. Hard to say what relation the monk had either to the bar or the tattoo parlor. You didn't

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feel it was your place to ask. You lacked the proper cultural information to know if he was out of place. Maybe this was an entirely common sight in that part of the world. Maybe you would be revealing yourself as a dope if you asked about him.

You told Hung that if you were on duty when this riot or insurrection or whatever it was occurred, you would just assume shoot Hung in his nappy head with the sniper's rifles they armed the guards with and let that be that.

"I ain't got nothing against you, understand, especially, m'man," you told Hung and smiled and honored him with a little bit more of the corn liquor from his quarter filled flask. Rather, you had plans for yourself that didn't involve either being tied up and tortured by one of the self-styled "revolutionaries" on this tier. Or murdered outright by either of the same. Or by one of the shell-shocked guards whose night terrors had become your day terrors gradually. As you were situated on the same barracks with them and their high-pitched vocalizations proved hypnotic enough to you so that you began to see things through their eyes while on duty. Everything that had happened to them was happening to you, albeit in abstracted segments. You understood them deeply but at the same time hated them for their craven weakness. There was no honor in screaming for *mother, mother, mother* at the top of your motherfucking lungs during 4 AM diabolical visions. Shut up and end it already! End the pain! You always thought if life ever became excessively burdensome, this was what you would do. Just end it! You thought there was deep shame in their condition, even though a competent psychiatrist might have argued otherwise.

You were deeply hopeful that when a real prison riot finally started you would be long gone from the premises. You would watch the mayhem remotely on a color TV.

"I got a model all picked out right from the Sears catalog, a twenty-four-inch Zenith with retractable built-in antennas in

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the back," you said to Robert Wilkinson, an implacable, impeccable Negro sitting Indian-style on his cot now. "Supposedly you plug it in and there it is for you. There is a remote control optional for an extra nineteen ninety-five which I won't be getting," you told him without being prompted. "As I don't find leaping up from the couch every now and again to change the channel an excessive activity. It gives ya exercise. It makes you feel you're alive. Alternately you can lie in front of the TV and change it that way. Why, I don't know what I'll do. I suppose it depends how drunk I'll be at the time," you told Robert Wilkinson. "I'll let the moment decide for me," you said. "Ultimately it won't be my decision at all."

You had, according to your own hopeful interpretation of the Veterans Readjustment Benefits Act, four months' severance pay coming to you just after your discharge that you were entitled to spend any way you wanted.

"Two quarts of gin and a bow-legged hooker for the evening," was your presently stated desire. It would take place just after what you had come to conceive of as your second birth.

Occasionally, depending on the level of your inebriation, your wish became "two quarts of whores and bow-legged gin." One never knew about the mysteries of human desire. But this was taken as a slip of the tongue on your part by anybody within earshot. So, it had become your reputation of being a garrulous sort and one whose vows and claims were to be taken with a grain of salt and not, in contrast to Bill Gladd, as gospel. Because of such chattiness, you were the least hated military screw in USP Leavenworth at the time and would be genuinely missed by the inmates when your commission expired. You liked to talk to some of them and didn't seem so prepared to bury a boot down their throats on a whim. Less than four years removed from the reform school in Detroit, you saw a bit yourself in them. The prisoners here

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were all in a way oppressed. Which was not to say they hadn't brought a great deal of it on themselves. Unlike you, so many of them were not versed in the stoic art of anger management. Their true crime seemed to be either the possession of an overly spontaneous personality or an absence of cunning. Many of them lacked a real Plan B in their lives. They didn't have a fucking clue about how to dodge a draft properly, for example. Or else they wouldn't have been here. You could join the clergy and obtain a status of Conscientious Objector or relocate to Canada. Draft dodging was a thoughtless middle-class endeavor. It was no great toll on either the heart or the intellect.

Maybe they knew how to dodge properly but they didn't care that much to execute flawlessly. And this you found surpassingly strange about them. It compelled you to get to know them even better than you otherwise would have.

Robert Wilkinson, who had at various stages in his life been assessed to have an IQ alternately of 79 and 147, had been picked up for failure to report for military service on the outskirts of his home town of Lima, Ohio. Yes, that Lima, Ohio: The Wax Bean capitol of the United States. They named the place after Lima, Peru but that was it as far as a cosmopolitan outreach went. Lima, Ohio had a segregated this and a segregated that despite its northern locale. The only reason a black man would want to live there was it was either Lima or jail.

Having been convicted and offered a choice between a short stretch in the boot camp stockade subsequent to enlistment or four years consecutive at USP Leavenworth, Robert chose USP Leavenworth, reasoning that the solicitude of prison life might have a positive effect on his burgeoning career as a writer.

"No, never had a second thought," Robert, who wrote science fiction, told you seconds after your suggestion that a short stay in the shit too might be a creatively nurturing

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experience, if one was able to survive it. According to Robert, everything he needed to experience as a writer he had experienced by age sixteen. He made no claim for himself as a great adventurer of any sort. All war novels he found boring to the point that he had abandoned them halfway through. He didn't see their profundity as (to judge by the blurbs on the backs of their dust jackets) others had. He didn't see their documenting of misery and travesty as some sort of usable template that he could incorporate into his own novels when the time came to write them.

Rather he consumed works of theosophy and the occult, coupled with French existentialism. From Sartre in particular he derived little pleasure but trudged through it regardless. As a traveler through a bleak winter field might be convinced that a sumptuous spring grove resided on the other side of the tree line.

"I'm not a man of action," Robert sheepishly admitted to you, pointing to the collection of books over the shoulder piled on top of each other in four-foot rows. (As of the last Leavenworth riot in 1958, bookshelves had been expressly forbidden because of the possibilities for their use as a truncheon. Not that Robert Wilkinson would seem the type to wield a truncheon against anybody. He was five feet eight and weighed a hundred forty pounds. *Little piece of chicken* he would have been called in maximum security joints. He was somebody's punk waiting for the reaming to commence.)

Even here in a federal prison (which was technically classified as a medium security prison) rape was a fact of life. On at least two occasions in your short stay here you had witnessed something to that effect taking place in the shower room. You had done nothing about it as you had been briefed to do nothing about it. You had been told that it was "a fact of life for men behind bars."

The official policy was to neither encourage nor discourage rape. The thought amongst the brass was that

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rape had some salubrious effect of establishing a social hierarchy. Which from a distance could be interpreted as social order. Moreover, they thought most of these inmates were naturally depraved and that contact with each other only made them more so as if they were animals being driven insane by the others' scent. The brass wasn't willing to invest any capital in rape prevention. They were appalled by it like anybody else. But at some level they thought all sex was consensual. The bosses here weren't for the most part especially deep thinkers on this subject and others. Weak put-upon men hanged themselves in Leavenworth every now and again and the bosses were usually at a loss to explain why. Again, they assumed this was some sort of innate attribute attaching itself to pusillanimous types. There was no need for military/police interaction. It was Mother Nature on parade.

Strangely other prisoners tended to move around Robert Wilkinson's alien surface absent of any touching or aggression. The reason for this he had just finished explaining to you in that soft calm voice of his was that they (like you) were all figments of his imagination. And as such they would not be allowed to harm him. He was convinced that this was the case even though there was no objective evidence that this was true. He made the assertion to you in the same tone that he recognized your presence. Calm to a point of being affectless. To him, there seemed to be no possibility that he was wrong about this. He was on to other considerations entirely. Such as why he had been chosen to be the Dreamer of This World. Perhaps he was the only creature that had ever actually existed. Constantly he was imaging himself beyond his cell's walls as an infinite being temporarily asleep using cluster of galaxies as his pillow. Ultimately there was no last answer for why Robert Wilkinson Was. Likely he had Always Been. But he had only been made aware of himself lately. His prison confinement was a type of self-exile that would end when he felt himself ready. Thus, he felt no need to fit in. As

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generally one did not ingratiate oneself with the figments of one's own dreams, realizing their evanescence at some level. Metaphysically, a dreamer was far superior to his dreams. But he never felt the need to point this out to the swirling figments about him, because it would fall on deaf ears.

The day Robert Wilkinson became God—who of all people in the universe had been vouchsafed to access to this secret knowledge—was the day he had been arrested for draft dodging in Lima, Ohio.

"Or maybe just a little after it," he said wistfully. "Like at two in the morning that day," he said. "I was in the Allen County jail, appearing to the world just like I am now," he said. "I had a sudden insight like electric shock. And then the dream inside the reality was made known to me. I was awakened finally if only to the extent that I was made aware that I was still asleep. And once armed with this knowledge, I began to be able to control aspects of the dream pouring itself out in front of me. That is, I wasn't its victim anymore. I became its master soon enough. And so you see here I am in the hurricane's center," he said. "Nothing of this world affects me anymore. And I have no notion of being the former Robert Wilkinson ever."

Robert considered you to be an unreal figment too just like the other screws or Leavenworth's more objectionable inmates.

"I think you needed to take the deal they were first offering you, man," you said to Robert about the stint in the Marines, "because they surely would have discharged you with a Section 8 before your black ass could ever be made to hunker down in a rice paddy."

Robert smiled when you said this to him and leaned backed on his cot. This was exquisitely made up with the blanket stretched tightly enough over the narrow mattress to bounce a quarter eighteen inches high per army standards.

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"Just because you doubt what is true," he said to you, "doesn't make it untrue. Reality doesn't alter one bit based on your cynicism about it. If anything, it becomes even stronger owing to the fact that you choose not to affect it. It ignores you and goes about its business ably. It is not concerned about adding one more believer to its fold."

If all this was the case, you asked Robert, why was he still stuck here in USP Leavenworth?

"What difference does it make to God," he asked you, "where his corporeal form is placed? Why would I want to leave this place when I'm having such a good time as it is?"

"Make me disappear then," you said to him as an alternative plan. "Blink your eyes or whatever it is you do and I'll vanish. At which point you'll have one less disbeliever to have to tolerate in your fantasy. Because the better you can make your world outside is the better you can make your world inside. And soon for you the distinction between outside and inside will disappear and you'll truly be the God you've always considered yourself to be."

As if he was trying to do what you proposed, Robert Wilkinson's otherwise implacable face revealed a certain activity underneath like arcs of moray eels moving underneath its surface.

"I'd be letting you off the hook if I did this," he finally decided to tell you as if your request had been enough to make him wonder temporarily after his own sanity. "The way I look at it, he said, "you're here for a reason. Maybe it's to learn something or maybe it's to help somebody else learn something. I wouldn't have made you if I hadn't needed you maybe in some lesser incarnation. I wouldn't have decided that you were the one to walk around drinking your cloudy poison if for some reason deep down I hadn't needed you to do so. It's like a knot that comes undone in stages, every human life. This is true of you especially," he said to you. "Eventually the knot of your consciousness comes undone."

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And then the rope can be re-used. It's not something that you would have to wish for. It will happen to you eventually. The knot will come undone. Makes no sense from an elevated man's perspective at all to wish for it."

You couldn't argue with that or anything else Robert said, and you had no desire to do so anyway. You were simply intrigued about him blinking you out of existence at some point. You wondered what would happen if he succeeded. Probably nothing. By definition this was neither good nor bad. But if only for the split second when the transition from existing to not existing had begun it might well prove highly stimulating for you. Logic argued against Robert Wilkinson possessing this power. But the serenity with which he put forward the assertion was off-putting in the extreme. Hard to say why he hadn't condemned the world to flames already if he had even a portion of the power he claimed to have. This was the greatest argument against his claim. The fact that hellfire eternal for all men was still a theoretical construct likely meant he had no ability to force his will on you. Not even your toes were warm most parts of the day.

Apart from the tenant himself, the only object within Robert Wilkinson's cell you found interesting was the same Penguin edition of Blake that you once owned back in 63' and had discarded just before entering basic.

"What'll you give for that," you asked Robert whose eyes were closed at the moment. He seemed to be dreaming once more.

Eventually he opened his eyes to look at you.

"What'll you give me for what?" he asked you eventually.

"The poetry book over there," you said to him. "How about a quarter ounce of hash in return?"

"Poetry," Robert Wilkinson said. "I'm struggling even with the meaning of the word."

You said to him, "William Blake."

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William Blake. "I dreamed of this William Blake once," Robert Wilkinson told you. "In the dream, he became a full grown man and sprouted wings in the garden I had made for him. So I'm afraid you are mistaken," he said, "when you speak to me of poetry. Poetry never was and never will be in my Blakean garden. The fact of the matter is it wouldn't be allowed to remain if I knew of it. It would be raised like Sodom and Gomorrah if it so much as appeared to me as something drawn from real life."

*I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.*

*And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.*

*And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.*

In the next cell over to Wilkinson's, the flag of the Soviet Union, the old Hammer and Sickle, was draped over bars that had gone black in places from inmates' sweaty palms.

"Cracker, you gonna be the first to die when the shit starts for real," came the voice from the next cell over. The utterer was half hidden from view by the opaque flag and by the angular shadows endemic to the cages as only a single sixty watt bulb was provided to each inmate for illumination.

But, you thought peering into the cell for just a moment, I was never alive in the first place according to Robert. So how could this be?

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If ever so briefly you didn't understand what was bring alleged. At a logical level, you didn't understand what you were being threatened with.

As a species, you thought, if only for the common good, we needed to get our collective stories straight.

"Motherfucker," you said to your hidden interlocutor. "I wish you success in all that you do."

You took out a pack of matches and held a lit one underneath the red flag just for a little while to see what would occur. Nothing happened. As per federal standards it was treated with non-flammable material. Other America-loving screws had tried to burn it to judge by the burns along its fringes. Eventually you gave up and walked away. Nothing more by that point had been said. You didn't believe there was any need to write a report on the prisoner.

You thought every man was entitled to his opinion.

III.

Ten miles north of USP Leavenworth stood a Potawatomi Indian reservation. The reservation was named after a chief whose exploits long ago were forgotten even by his own tribe. The white government hung the name around the Potawatomi's necks like the seagull in the Coleridge rime. They were deeply ashamed of themselves at some level. The government wanted to remind themselves that this was the case.

When you drove out there you had six weeks to go on your double hitch. You were squirrely as all get out. You thought that something might fuck your discharge up.

You were trying not to do a damn thing to delay your exit even a second longer than what was required.

"Right over here, sir," you said to your barracks' commander, Captain Simon Clark, when seeing an available car seat nearby. You were on the reservation's great

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introductory plain. The jeep you had arrived in had run out of navigable road. You had decided to hoof it to your destination. But only the Captain knew where that might be.

You were his toady, his lickspittle now, fearful as you were of some sort of indictment that would put your discharge in jeopardy. The brass could kick your ass out of the army at any time of course. They had special emergency provisions for delaying your exit for several months if they had judged you of being in possession such invaluable abilities that you need to remain around in the eternal struggle against the Red Menace.

"Sir, if you need a shoulder to lean on just use one of mine. I'm strong as an ox and just as dumb. I can walk the both of us anywhere in this place quickly as you might want to go."

The Captain, it seemed, had had a rough few hours of it on the way out here. He needed a shoulder to lean on literally. Or better yet he needed to sit down. This Potawatomi reservation was otherwise ill-equipped to deal with the physical requirements of incapacitated guests. From an Indian's perspective, the earth itself proved as welcoming an object for an exhausted body as existed in the universe. There was no need to improve upon it. There was no need to seek out an object to offer improvements for a device that was never conceived of as flawed from the outset.

The car seat nearby was ripped out from an old Mercury Comet that had been sold for scrap after having its exterior twisted into intriguing curvilinear patterns by a speeding semi going the other way on the famous Route 66 just outside Oklahoma City. Reservation residents either bought the scrap or allowed it to be dumped on their land without compensation. Every now and again outsiders would stroll through the area and pick up spare car parts. They would see the car seats lying there and take a load off believing that was their intention to begin with.

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Devoid of a level floor to be bolted into, the car seat took a good deal of balance to sit upright in even for a man who had not given himself over completely to a type of walking oblivion.

"Steady over there, sir," you said to Captain Clark seeing him start to topple over onto the seat's right side. Hard to say with him whether standing was a more difficult activity than sitting in the Comet seat. He had gotten into something that gnawed at his equilibrium profoundly. His infirmity was past the point that a non-partial observer would recommend medical care. He was not about to receive medical care out here in the middle of nowhere. One would have thought if he was so sick that he wouldn't have hazarded the journey to begin with.

Was he stoned or drunk or sick? Hard for you to tell truly staring at him in a perpetual wobble like a toddler too soon having mounted the hobby horse in its nursery. In all other aspects of his bearing, you knew Captain Clark as an upstanding if unremarkable officer. You assumed if he had been three sheets to the wind while on duty, he would have at least tried to conceal it from a grunt like you. If only as a matter of personal pride, he would have sequestered himself in his quarters when he found he had an inability to stand on his own for more than twenty seconds at a throw.

So it was that you reached the conclusion that Captain Clark was sick with something whose symptoms he felt he had no obligation to attempt to hide from you. Something was wrong with his nervous system maybe, some neuron-eating bug had infiltrated into the folds of his brain and was presently eating its way out. Likely he was a goner. He had likely received the diagnosis that he was a goner months ago, along with the prediction about how many months he had to live. Family-less and friend-less, he been driven out here by you to the Indian reservation. He wanted to have one last go around out here so to speak. You didn't know what his

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business was out here. You assumed it was perverse owing to your limited understanding of human nature. You assumed that if he had recovered sufficiently to do so, eventually you would be invited along. He had taken a dull liking to you in the limited time he knew you. He treated you like a dumb kid brother. He thought of you as somebody benign which might have been a mistake. He thought of you as somebody who could be trusted even as you cultivated a persona of harshness, somehow sensing that the worst for you was yet to come.

On the short ride over here, Clark had intimated to you that the reservation was a place where his greatest happiness as an adult came about.

"Well, sir, who is it anyway?" you asked him. "Can you point me in a direction where a telephone might be found? I won't tell anybody what I see or what I've been told. Consider it a military secret. We can always head back to the Jeep if you want. But that would entail me carrying you the rest of the way."

Captain Clark didn't want to leave this world having forgotten all about it. Very likely within a few weeks he wouldn't be able to walk around on his own, let alone benefit from the horizontal enjoyment he was attempting to procure out here in a place that looked inviting only to the prairie dogs (who outnumbered humans in the area ten to one).

"You're messed up, Captain. If I might be allowed to speak freely," you told him and watched the light in his eyes gradually dim as if connected to a rheostat. "I mean, even the damn Indians don't want to live out here. If you need to have your dick sucked by a squaw, there are more inviting places to have this done. You ask enlisted personnel for the location of local whorehouses. There's one a hundred yards from the prison walls. There's another one right above a bar-b-que joint in downtown Leavenworth."

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As the sinful metropolis of Kansas City had been declared off limits to all USP personnel resultant from a 1965 race riot, such places as these held a monopoly for those wishing to partake in the pleasures of the flesh. For yourself you had no more desire to visit a country fuck shack than be back in the Leavenworth barracks staring at the moderately diverting site of a funnel spider on the wall collecting dead flies for its young. You had been to such places several times already in your short stay here and found them lacking. Once flown from Kansas, these would be the places you would immediately disremember. They were boring and dirty according to you. They had nothing to offer a soul in the way of quality female entertainment.

A great expanse of yellow brown earth dotted with discarded metal hulks and various structures made entirely out of wood and tar paper was suddenly all around you. You hadn't noticed how desolate this place was having been otherwise pre-occupied with your duty. You couldn't believe that people were forced to live out their lives in such a place absent even a single creature comfort.

Captain Clark had toppled over onto his side and stayed that way for seconds with his face three-quarters turned into the dry earth.

"Good gravy captain," you said to him once having become convinced that he had neither the ability nor the drive to rise under his own power. You walked over to him and bent down. You were looking for some small sign that he might be jerking your chain. He lacked, as far as you knew, a sense of humor. You were wondering, nevertheless, if for his own reasons he might have been putting you on.

Definitely not. Clark had this stricken look about him that even a Hollywood actor couldn't mimic perfectly.

He was not drunk, but laboring under some physical impairment that mimicked a drunken state ably enough from a distance. At some point he would be asking somebody to

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put him out of his misery altogether. By then you would have hoped to be far away from this place. You had no desire to have any sort of relationship with one of your superior officers. You didn't give a shit about his well-being. You were afraid of him merely and what he might do to you. Semi-daily you had nightmares about being shipped back to the action. You knew your rights, but you were still fearful about it. You assumed men in power could do whatever they wanted to you.

Clark had neither wife nor caretaker-relative to see to his transition unto the grave. He was still on official duty despite his illness and being allowed to do so for reasons that could only have pity at their root. Eventually he would be caught in the sort of position that you were seeing him in now and he would be immediately relieved of duty. The brass wouldn't have a choice at that point. They wouldn't be able to simply say that he was tired and needed an extended break.

Over the past week, fearful after your discharge, you had transitioned to your new role as Captain Clark's chauffeur and man servant. As far as you knew, your DD form was still in his desk unsigned. You felt you were being blackmailed into this duty subtly by him. You felt that Clark should hurry up and drop dead.

Presently struggling to rise from a bit of upturned earth that might have once been a prairie dog mound, you realized your best course of action with him was to play it straight as possible. There was nothing that you needed to do to facilitate his demise. You needed merely to stand back and wait for nature to take its course. You could play along with him. You could pretend he was a mere dowager in need of tender loving care.

"Captain," you said to him and grabbed him underneath the shoulder blades. You pulled him up to a standing position with remarkable ease. You were powerfully built by that time and underneath his baggy fatigues Clark's weight had

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declined to less than a hundred thirty pounds on a five-foot eleven-inch frame. Fairly easily you felt he could be lifted in the air. There he could be left to float for a significant amount of time. The clamminess of his body was palpable underneath his fatigues somehow though no stains on the garment was present. He was a goner, in other words, sooner than later.

But what if he died before he had the chance to sign your DD? You wondered if the brass would have the right to delay your discharge at that point. It would be resultant from some sort of common bureaucratic screw-up for which the army was famous. They would consider themselves blameless of course as usual. Very likely worse things had been done and would be done by them to better men than you.

So it was in your best interests to keep the man alive for the next few months. To judge by his outward appearance, however, this would take a messiah-level effort to execute successfully. He seemed beyond the help of even the best doctors. And mere stewardship of his illness likely wouldn't result in keeping him alive even a second more.

Probably the best course for him (and you by extension) would be to have him consigned to his hospital bed until the end came mercifully. Once that happened the logistics of the situation would improve for you precipitously. There would be no need to have to chauffeur him around as you were doing now. You would not be obliged to keep one eye on him lest he should slip and crack his skull.

Captain Clark's spectacles were shattered presently creating the strange illusion for you if only for the moment that a spider had spun a web impossibly in the glass's interior.

"I'm going for reinforcements," you said to him placing his head against the exterior of a half-buried tractor tire. Carefully you removed the broken spectacles from his face. You folded them carefully and placed them in your lapel pocket. When you returned to the prison barracks, you would place them on his office desk blotter and admit no memory of

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how they had come to be damaged in this way. You assumed the Captain was in profound denial about the changes his body were going through. Constantly he was wondering aloud how his pelvis had come to be bruised, for example. He was as unprepared to die as to perform all the other seemingly mundane tasks having to do with the running of the USP. Such work always came upon a man unexpectedly seemingly. Once it was in his midst, he was utterly ignorant about what he should do exactly.

With this latest tumble, he might have done real damage to himself. You felt the need if only out of self-interest to seek medical help for him. Maybe somebody would have an amphetamine to feed him that would allow Captain Clark to make it back to their jeep under his own power. You were indignant over the prospect of having to carry him back to it. You were not a mere porter or somebody who would come to you with the snapping of fingers. Couldn't a wheelchair be commissioned for him? Eventually you would feign a back injury if the brass insisted you carry on with your chauffeur duties. It would reach a point where it wasn't hardly worth it. Bad idea for him to request to be driven out here to the middle of nowhere when in this condition. But there was obviously something in this godforsaken area he wanted to see, if only for one last time. He was in no condition to fuck anybody obviously. So you actually had no idea what this trip was actually about.

Out here, the horizon line stretched for at least four miles in every direction. But your attention was always drawn profoundly to the object directly in front of you if only to forestall the vertigo that resulted from contemplating nothingness too deeply.

"None of that shit registers with you braves," you said to two Potawatomi kids you encountered sniffing glue on a rock a hundred fifty yards away from where Captain Clark lay. They weren't offering you a sniff from the brown paper bag

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they were using which made you wonder if this was the object Clark had in mind all along when he made you drive him out here. You rather doubted that there was some quality of the glue the Potawatomi sold in their stores that was of a superior quality to the glue they sold in Leavenworth, Kansas. More so was the fact that the Captain in the present moment was in no condition to enjoy this high regardless. Even when he could do so, he would offer you no clue about why you were here. At first you assumed it was none of your business. But presently you felt the need to at least go through the motions of searching out the object of the Captain's desire. You thought whoever he had come all the way out here to see would be of help. You thought one kind gesture was deserving finally of another.

The cabins in which the Indians lived at this advanced stage of the twentieth century were a half mile up the road from the two glue sniffers in a square twenty-acre lot that seemed entirely too compact an area for the several hundred people who comprised the local community.

"The tribe has its rules about such things," the taciturn man you encountered in one cabin, Gary Henry, told you when you posed the question to him amongst others about what it was that Clark might be in the process of seeking out here. He said that all the Indians in the reservations were renters or sharecroppers if you liked. Their shelters existed at the pleasure of the tribal council. He said that there was no sense whatsoever in asking questions that could bring misery unto the asker. There was plenty of shit evil white men were likely into around here, but Gary Henry would not comment upon it even a little. He didn't know who you were anyway. Maybe you were an agent from the tribal council. It could have been the case. You learn not to trust anybody the more you live. You could have been a Klansman in disguise maybe simply looking to stir up trouble.

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This reservation was the Potawatomi's land just as the land off the reservation belonged to white people. That didn't mean you were safe on any side of that line. Cruelty came in many colors. It didn't mean you trusted a red man any more than a white man regardless of whose land you were on.

"Suck my dick and I'll think about explaining it," Gary told you, making what sounded like a thoughtful offer for his services. He had said he knew of Captain Clark but didn't care for him hardly. The fact that he was dying warmed Gary Henry's icy heart. It made him feel more alive than he had been in decades.

On this reservation, if you wanted to build anywhere you needed to ask the tribal council's permission.

"The reason we're all stuck in together like this," he told you, "is that the permission never comes. It's all a scam to pit us against each other," he said. "If we hate each other we'll stop hating you. And then you'll have power over us for good."

Gary thought it should have been self-evident enough of a situation that a question was not required from you. But then he looked in your face and saw how young you were and decided to speak about it anyway.

"So fight a revolution if you don't like it, red," Gary Henry said to you anticipating your next dumb question and rocked back slightly in his chair. This was a handmade piece of furniture whose legs were cobbled from old car parts, mostly the rocker panels from a presently dead Oldsmobile.

According to Gary Henry, the council had the complete support of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the county police as well. You took up arms against them, you took up arms against the United States of America too. It's a losing battle you'll be fighting and in a place at a far enough remove from television cameras so that your civil rights would not mean a goddamn thing. They'll shoot you down just like they had Spotted Elk at Wounded Knee. Bury you where you lay. And

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nothing more. The best that you could do while it was happening was make believe that it was not real. That's why the Indian focused so fiercely on his drink and huffing. It's best to go to sleep in this life in the fierce pursuit of another, better life. Every dream will come true if you waited long enough. So there's no real need to commiserate about this life when it's so subject to change and so quickly.

Gary Henry explained to you that this land was as foreign to the Potawatomi as to the white settlers who first busted sod in it a hundred twenty years back. His tribe by history and tradition were dwellers of the northern woods. The expansiveness of the vistas provided them nightmares for generations. Even now nobody was used to it.

"Every so often on this reservation a man will burst into tears for no reason," he told you. "And nobody tells you that it's strange or asks how come. It's our fault that we came here against our will," he said. "It's our fault when we refused to die. There is a warrior spirit who looks down on all men and doesn't forgive such a cowardice. There's nothing else we can do but live our lives and hope for forgiveness. We'll have another chance later to make things right," he told you. "There's nothing we can do but wait for our moment to come."

This was the sort of self-pitying bullshit destitute Injuns had been selling to white visitors ever since this horrid reservation opened. You knew this but found it compelling somehow nonetheless. You told him that whatever happened in the next few moments, whatever horrors you either saw or imagined you were not giving any money to the fire keepers. You thought it was their bad luck to have been born with red skin. Maybe this was punishment for some sort of unspeakable crime committed in the life before this one. Whatever the case, the inescapable truth was that you hadn't put them in this place. You were not their oppressor. Thus,

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you were immune to their blackmail. You felt that there was no need for Gary Henry to go any further.

"When your kind drinks too much," you said to Gary Henry, "what sort of contraption do you use to keep the coyotes from devouring the drunken flesh whole?"

Gary ignored the question then started playing about with the brim of his decades-old Homburg, worn more than likely as a salute to the poorly remembered past.

"The aim of the Indian nowadays is merely to survive," Gary told you, "whereas the aim of the white man is to make sure that survival is full of misery. You are our punishment for our failure as men."

You didn't doubt that this was the case. You nodded in assent.

"Do you know," you asked him. "Why I am out here? You're supposed to be wise in some way. Do you know why it is I'm leaning against your rickety door?"

Rather than answer directly, Gary Henry waved at the expanse of Kansas outside.

"Put two and two together, dumbass," he told you. "I know what you are deep down. I know of your stupidity and all your reckless ways. I know that the oblivion you seek will be granted to you. You are in many ways dumber than the Indian. You're much dumber than ordinary white men. And that makes me think that you're not one of them at all."

Gary Henry was drunk or at least seemed to be. So you let the insult pass unchallenged. Perhaps after the paperwork was processed you would stop back out here with Bill Gladd's deformed nightstick and crack open his skull to detect the difference in hue between his blood and his skin. You realized that eventually you would have to take a stand against them all. All the bullies and hard asses of this world would in time need to be made to suffer for their aggression against you.

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You could do it on the sly certainly in the way you saw Bill Gladd operate with some of the cons he didn't like. Quietly Bill would stroll by their cells and strike them on the bottoms of their bare feet with the nightstick when they weren't looking. They'd howl in agony but by then he'd be three cells past him. They would have no ability to gain revenge or justice by then. There would be no witnesses ever to what he had done. And his fellow screws weren't about to rat him out.

You knew where Gary Henry lived and, apparently, he wasn't going anywhere. The shotgun that he possessed was the old sort of pre-war bird rifle his stepfather once had that jammed after every other round fired. He wasn't a threat to anyone just then. You could do what you wanted with him at a rate you saw fit.

"It's a matter of military justice, understand," you whispered to yourself once having left his hovel. You were still inhabiting the revenge fantasy to the degree that the emotions generated from them could be felt by you. Now clear of the wooden neighborhood, you could see that similar structures dotted the reservation's acreage at intervals of five hundred yards. There was no infrastructure of any kind running from or to these neighborhoods including paved roads. There might have been around five working vehicles on the reservation, and these were trucks with overlarge tires usually used at industrial sites. The road-in was nowhere in your field of vision now. You were too far into the acreage now to glean the way out. Just as before, you would have to ask for directions. You would have to rely on encountering a friendlier type of Indian than that sort you had encountered thus far.

The tribal council hadn't put a great deal of thought into the area's livability.

So you began to imagine burning down the reservation one neighborhood at a time.

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"It would proceed like that as in a dream," Gary Henry told you minutes later, after somehow having moved in front of you into the next settlement. Presently he was sitting in the same chair he had been sitting in the former neighborhood.

Obviously, he was the same person. But in this location, he had a different slightly demeanor to him as if he had taken the measure of you back in the former neighborhood and was trying to merely meet you halfway.

"It's not as fast as you might imagine but it goes regardless," he told you merely of the deaths you had just imagined. "People will lay their heads on the chopping block you have made," he said. "There's no reason for you to tell them its true purpose. You simply announce yourself as an executioner. And then there are so many willing executionees. They will flock to you. It will happen inevitably like the blooming of flowers. You imagine yourself clever because of this but you're not clever in any way. It's the way of the world simply. They couldn't resist the impulse to be your victim if they wanted to."

Now, in this latest incarnation of yourself, you noticed that Gary Henry had slipped the pair of porcelain dentures that he had been wearing from his mouth. This latest incarnation of Gary began to seem profoundly ancient, therefore. He lisped when he talked afterwards. Maybe that was the way he wanted it.

He told you to appropriate a mare that some of the elders used to get their milk from. He told you to walk it around out back and discharge your sidearm into its grazing head.

"It's the way of the world, you know this," Gary Henry said and felt around with the tip of his tongue in the metal brace that his dentures fit into. Oh, the white men paid for the dentures as a result of his service in World War II. They had a G.I. Bill that guaranteed such benefits. They had a notion of themselves as survivors of a conflict horrible enough that it was required to be identified in any conscious way.

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IV.

The loss of mare's milk would serve the elders of this land right. After all, Gary Henry said, they were the ones that made you. You would be blameless in their deaths by malnutrition simply because you had not been the one to create the hate that created the impulse for you to kill from the start. It had been received by you rather like a telegram into a Western Union station. You had been the conduit for its outrage and not the reason it existed to begin with.

All men had it coming to them, after all, their murder at the hands of otherwise innocent individuals. And so, the smart play for us all would be to accept it docilely as we might. Gary Henry felt this was a true vision of justice. In murdering another you were merely the hate's conduit, a vessel for the outrage that had accrued in the hearts of men. You were nobody's prophet or high priest. People didn't respect you and they had no intention of doing so anytime soon. Merely, you were a superficial monster, a *golem* as the scattered Jews of the world insisted on calling you, empty inside like a clay pot. Soon enough a prayer would be spoken and you would be duty bound. Until that point arrived you could sit and rest. You could observe the world through those one-way aviator glasses of yours. Like you were doing now. Nothing would change in life until you were called into action. And always the feelings you experienced would be somebody else's, devoid of meaning for you but oddly compelling even though they were being broadcast in some foreign tongue.

Soon he had stopped talking because his toothless mouth's limitations made it painful to do so.

Of this latest Gary Henry, you wanted to know what the strange and offensive smell was wafting through this hovel's screen-less windows abetted by a gathering breeze.

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"Wild animals we have out here in abundance," he told you. "You wouldn't believe it but it's true. Packs of javelina coming up from the deserts of Texas come summer when the heat drives them to it. Then there are the cougars that prey on these and sometimes get caught in the traps we set for the wild pigs alone. We have a tannery out back," Gary said, "that takes care of all these. It's the Potawatomi's only real source of income," he said. "It's what we sell by the roadside come springtime. You see us out there on Route Thirty-Eight," he told you hopefully, "you go and stop your car. It's what make us, us," he said and fished around in his breast pocket for a cigarette to smoke.

You watched him smoke for a while then offered him one of yours. Somehow, he had forgotten the location of his own smokes. His mind wasn't as sharp as it used to be perhaps. Somehow, he had been called to other tasks utterly apart from sucking a little soothing smoke into his heaving lungs.

Outside this structure, the thought occurred to you as to why you were at this Indian reservation to begin with.

Am I an Indian? you thought. Does one of these here wooden shacks belong to me? And am I, therefore, obliged to buy firewood from the local general store so I don't freeze to death tonight?

Next to the tannery was a cabin with a shadow for a door. It was this structure you assumed that you were bound for all along before either of the Gary Henry's was encountered.

The little Potawatomi girl who was inside had not yet changed out of last night's underwear and the military shirt Captain Clark had given her on the occasion of his last visit five months back.

"You put a veil on your face, and I know somebody just like you, have seen you on many an occasion" you told her. In your presence, the girl had taken to cowering on one corner. You were just about to request that she go up on one leg when an eagle from some distant bluff began to circle the

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empty spaces between the ramshackle neighborhoods. Very meaningful symbol apparently for such a superstitious people. The Indians emerged into the open area to look. You too eventually emerged into the open area to look. You had forgotten about your new home just then. Or no. It wasn't yours and never had been. The girl was gone when you turned around again as you were sure she would be. She had never been there in the first place, so you imagined.

Whereas this eagle was as real as the sun that caused it to become a shadow within its radiant framework. You watched it for a while with surpassing disinterest and moved onto something else. But you never would forget this place and the things you saw on this day. For some reason. This was your home, therefore, whether you liked it or not. And in a way you had never left it even as you returned to the jeep absent of your commanding officer. And thought of an excuse to tell the brass once they had wondered what in Sam Hill had happened to him.

1975: Endless Night

I.

You followed the meandering progress of an arsenic-tinged river up and over the great frozen lake to the north. There was a dog sled race starting from Houghton that you tagged along with as a musher's second. Marquette County had issued a bench warrant against you was the reason for your flight. You assumed you would have wound up in prison otherwise. You assumed the cops were staking out your shabby woodland property even now.

You believed that this was the drift of your life, its *telos*, to end up forgotten in a cage like a wild animal in a bankrupt zoo. You felt lucky that you were still free presently, albeit while in exile. You felt lucky to be allowed to go about your business of making a living and drinking yourself to death. You realized so many worse alternatives to your present existence. There was nothing worse than prison life.

The bench warrant was issued as a reaction against you throwing a pot of scalding water into the face of your common law wife, Maxine. Afterwards you had chased Maxine out into the Michigan snow with the still steaming cast iron pot waving in your hand like Thor's hammer.

By degrees you began to conceptualize the pot as a type of dunce cap that Maxine should be made to wear. You were aggrieved certainly at the time, if only to judge by your

actions. You were drunk off your ass and alienated from your true intentions. Everything at that point was a blur to you. Even now you couldn't attest with absolute certainty to the righteousness of your cause.

"As far as I can tell she had it coming to her," you said to your table partner, Ben Norgaard, while waiting out a demonstration at Confederation College's sparkling new Animal Husbandry Centre. Silver was everywhere in this enormous room, including the stainless-steel countertops in front of you. The floor was silver-colored and coated with a water proof material. The scalpels and bone saws were stainless steel too and reflecting back broken images of you upon the polished table.

You thought back to the specific precipitating event for your assault and decided it was too far in the past to say why for sure. Maxine might have burned the roast, for example. She might have undercooked the spaghetti.

More likely was the cloudy state of the ice in your drink on account of a water filter gone bad. You had told Maxine constantly to check the goddamn filter weekly, to replace it if necessary. You had money set aside to forestall such an eventuality. You had told her constantly to make a test tray of ice and hold the cubes up to newsprint so that you could read the words.

"It's all I talked to her about in those days, the clear ice in the whiskey and the spotless tumbler," you said to Ben revivifying it just for the moment to make sure it all was true. Of late, you were experiencing such diversions where fantasies and run-of-the-mill perceptions were bleeding together into a brackish singularity. Presently you dreamt with your eyes open, unaware that dreaming was taking place. Simply as a matter of ordinary awareness it was hard for you to distinguish between dreams and perceptions. Sometimes you believed yourself already in jail or in a mental institution where, rather than undergoing therapy, you were

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forced to imagine such violent outbursts as the one you were in the midst of describing to Ben. You weren't a rash person under most normal, non-drunk circumstances, you didn't think. Perhaps they, your invisible captors, had fed you something that caused you to act rashly. Perhaps they were testing your limits, trying to ascertain where your breaking point lay.

The clear ice in the whiskey and the spotless glass were deeply important to you. In that they stood as physicalized counter-arguments against your marginalized life in the wilds of Michigan.

"The chairman of IBM comes home at night to his mansion, I'm guessing, and pours a glass of whiskey from his crystal tumbler. He puts ice in it so as to bring out the drink's flavor," you said to Ben. "And at this moment he and I are equals. The chairman of IBM's doing what I'm doing and in the exact way. He pours a drink and stares into the glass and watches the ice melt. Wherever he is in his easy chair, he's doing the same as me. For both of us there's nothing to worry about until the next day when you sober up."

Truth be told, ever since escaping to Canada, you had been hitting the sauce heavily both in the middle of the day and at night. You were drinking fortified wine and you didn't use ice to cut it. It was vile and needed to remain vile as a spur to try and come by better booze. You took heavy pulls straight from the wide-mouthed bottle until it was gone. You thought of it as your medication basically. You thought once your business was up and running it would be back to Wild Turkey and the occasional bottle of Glenlivet which was readily available on this side of the lake and reasonably priced.

The night class presently which you and Ben were attending was entitled *Animal Husbandry 401: The Subtle Art of Taxidermy*.

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"She's at her mother's," you said to Ben of Maxine's present location when, as a surprise to you, he had asked after her whereabouts. In fact, you had no idea of her whereabouts. Once in Thunder Bay, you were going to call the phone number that you both shared but had thought better of it. You had thought there might be a trace on the end of it. You didn't understand how phone traces worked. You thought if you called anybody, the cops had the ability regardless to track you without any setup on their end. You had seen it in a movie once, a successful trace. You thought they could trace your call and report you to Interpol. You thought they had the ability and probably the drive to hound you for the rest of your days.

She was an Ojib, Maxine, and apart from her body's contours and her scent cloud you didn't know the first damn thing about her. You didn't know if she had a mother, let alone her location. You had lived with her for two years but didn't know anything about her. The facts of her life hadn't been, from your perspective, important. They hadn't been something you were fixated upon like, say, the run of elk in the part of the Michigan woods you inhabited and the reams of paperwork it took to take one of them down legally.

"I had me a thirty-ought six sitting on a rack for three years," you said to Ben, talking about your lone hunting rifle now flown from your possession. The musher you rode with across Lake Superior wouldn't allow it on his sled, claiming that it spooked his malamutes. He was strange that way with what you felt was a sort of unearned pacifism. He was Yooper born and bred, but he had never so much as shot a single stag on a November idyll. He never gave a true reason for his aversion to guns. He never elaborated on his once stated conviction that guns were the tools of the insane and corrupted, serving no useful purpose at all.

Believing yourself susceptible to arrest, you had left the rifle by the starting line in Houghton. It was there to be

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claimed by whoever happened upon it first. For yourself, you had only derived minimal pleasure from it. Your larger point to Norgaard was that the Michigan DNR hadn't let you harvest a single elk with it. The creature was considered an endangered species whose culling would be considered a felony. They loved elk downstate more than they loved people apparently. Every so often somebody in a bar had attempted to cull you without apparent legal implications. They didn't seem to believe themselves in the wrong when doing so. They seemed unconstrained by both law and commandment.

"Elk ain't like you and me. They're destructive of their surroundings," you said to Ben about the animal you lived to hunt. They were a plague upon the local florate, you said, eating the mossy bark off trees until the forests began to defoliate. Moreover, the notion of the preservation of nature altogether seemed supremely decadent to you. To you, it seemed at odds with basic human conduct. Some animals just like people couldn't adapt and as a result they were expunged from the book of life. You couldn't see why a single ignominious elk should have a status above a human being with a Christian name and surname and an ability to communicate its suffering to others of its kind ably enough, adopting a type of self-created dignity therefore, alien to the herd.

Arguing the point as best as your limited education allowed you to, you wrote a letter to Michigan's Governor Milliken, highlighting your Vietnam veteran status as an afterthought.

"Two tours of duty in-country and in places that even the people of that country forgot to name," you told Ben making your fist into a gavel briefly as if this was a judgment against the world that required articulation. "And in return I asked to be allowed to run my life as I saw fit. I asked to be allowed to bring meat onto my own table. I asked to be allowed to care

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for myself in the same way my ancestors had probably cared for themselves unto the beginning of time."

The elk, you took pains to note to Ben, was a disgusting creature plagued by parasites and desirous of the alleviation of its pain in any way necessary.

"We'd be doing it a great service eradicating it from the fucking planet," you told Ben, not paying the slightest attention to the muttered scornful statements around you after you said this. After all, this was a class for aspiring taxidermists whose livelihoods were entirely dependent on such creatures' continued existence. Unlike you, these men (and one woman) generally had no ax to grind with Mother Nature. They didn't see the world in the stark terms you saw it in, as a near apocalyptic winter-scape wherein survival was the single moral imperative.

It was strange encountering such people after a near eight-year exile in prison and the army where the soul's mutilation was inevitable. They seemed surpassingly depraved to you in their normalcy. Their social concern and unstated humanism seemed redolent of rot to you, if only deep down. Hardly hippies, nevertheless, the elk-loving wardens of the DNR especially seemed to you to be afflicted with the same delusional mindset that was bound to fail over time.

You didn't understand the desire to make the world a better place. You thought that to kill was to confirm to the universe that you were alive. As to be entirely empty of the ability to kill was the same as being dead in a moral sense.

"Simple as can be, easy-peasy," you said to Ben Norgaard and leveled an imaginary rifle at the Centre's front. "I ain't never ate elk in my entire life," you told him. "I kill because I kill. Because that's what I do. I don't judge myself like others judge me. It's an instinct I have, a desire to exploit. It's something deep down in me, man, near and dear. I didn't do it for the game meat even a little. I didn't shell out a hundred eighty dollars on a sniper's rifle cause my diet needed to be

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supplemented with something more than a cheeseburger every now and again."

Ben Norgaard's expressed opinion of hunting was his opinion of the weather native to this part of western Ontario. Which was that the less you thought about it the better. He wasn't offended by anything you had to say about your desire to stalk elk. Himself a victim of a scalding, however, while working once at a Hostess factory in Scarborough, he was slightly concerned about the fate of Maxine. He was about to tell you that even second degree burns to the face required the speedy intercession of a medical professional if festering was to be avoided. They tended to suppurate quickly devoid of antiseptic. They tended to leave a scar if left to heal on their own.

Ben Norgaard was native to a farm outside of Timmins, Ontario which was as far north as you could get before the soil turned so stony that even the decades-long ministrations of obsessive farmers would not be enough to sustain agriculture.

"Maybe it was the TV," he said to you seemingly helpfully about the origin of your rage back in Michigan. By this he might have meant either the physical device itself or maybe something that was on the device, something that you saw on it that set you off on your violent course. Well, the fall of Saigon had taken place only weeks before. On CBC's evening news they were replaying the footage constantly, the helicopter falling off the back of the ship like it was a dead dragonfly tumbling off a tree branch. Ben figured a man like you who had served in the war might find the footage vexing in the extreme. He figured perhaps this was what caused you to lose control so easily. Maybe you were looking for an answer. Maybe you didn't know your own heart so well. This was like most other men who lived in the barren parts of the world.

Could have been the TV, or maybe, as you had intimated, the cloudy nature of the ice in your whiskey tumbler. But he

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said the fact that you were looking at all was a positive sign regarding the future state of your immortal soul. As the only way any of us get to Ultimate Truth was to ask questions about our own motives relentlessly. Ben Norgaard had gotten to Ultimate Truth that way by asking probing questions about himself. Ever since then he had walked with the Lord. Presently he was incapable of taking a false step. He knew the answers before the questions were asked. The Lord whispered them to him in soothing tones into his left ear. He knew everything about you, for example, even before he met you.

"If you want to have the purest ice possible," Ben said to you doubling back on a familiar theme, "what you do is boil the water and condense the steam. Case closed," he said to you. "A special friend told me that once," he said pointing to his left where there was only empty air. "It's like living with an encyclopedia," he said to you of the special friend. "Because of her, I have crazy ideas all the time that aren't my own. But that doesn't mean they're untrue."

Ben Norgaard had an uncle, he said, who had gone crazy once from the loneliness that he had encountered living along James Bay. He had moved up there by himself to collect his thoughts. But once there, he encountered an endless dark night of the soul. The fact that he had done so at all might have been taken as an early symptom of insanity. Maybe insanity had been latent in him all along and the isolation of James Bay only brought it to the surface.

"He reminds me of you," Ben told you, neglecting to say whether it was before or after the craziness descended. Then he changed seats. He had had enough of you and your morose disconnectedness apparently. Well, maybe not. He might have been merely trying to bait you into following him. Ben Norgaard kept his own counsel. Quite likely (and merely) his special friend had told him to move. He couldn't explain it as he felt it was blasphemy to even try.

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Now, according to William Blake, Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian king had lost his mind while eating grass as his oxen had. But, really, it's either the earth's white emptiness or the relentless contemplation of the same that drove men mad.

As Northern Ontario in winter was a blank piece of paper thirsting for a single line of poetry to break its undifferentiated gloom. Everything up here tended to fade into the background. And the background was usually imperceptible as a polar bear in a snow field sleeping through the warm day.

Up front in the Centre's raised staged, the demonstration model had lately arrived, having been dragged in by its neck

over the room's immaculate silver floor by the course's muscle-bound instructor, Rodney Heseltine, PhD.

"Meat is the enemy of a pristine memorabilia," Dr. Heseltine told his class of a dozen after the thirty-pound stag had been situated on the vertical rack by its back hooves in preparation of its disemboweling. Barely a yearling this one, with antlers less than five inches high forming singular points alone rather like the antennae protruding from cartoon spacemen's helmets. Killed with a steel bolt to its temple launched by a spring-powered contraption in the holding pen out back, the stag's death was neither extended nor (supposedly) cruel. It was chosen merely because it was available. It was a specimen donated by a hunter who had slain its mother months back and wished to keep the faun from starving. The stag's head had been locked in place by two steel side bars when entering the cage and then the steel bolt was released into its brain. Moments before entering the Centre, Dr. Heseltine had watched the stag's legs buckle before collapsing. It had tried to run but the side bars had held it in place. A second later it was slumped down hanging by its neck. Despite the bolt's intrusion, Heseltine hadn't seen any damage to the hide. He was checking the specimen carefully before the side bars would be rolled back. He didn't know what he would do if there was damage. He didn't

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know if the caping demonstration could go on. He was fastidious in that weird way of all virtuosos. If there was even slight damage to the hide, he was seriously considering cancelling the class.

When you move a carcass to your work area, Heseltine was saying as he readied his own instruments, drag the deer by the head or neck to forestall the incidence of internal bleeding. Remember, he said: meat is the enemy of pristine memorabilia.

He was fucking serious about this. As he was with everything else related to his craft. The hide needed to be cut from the carcass as soon as time allowed. Similarly, the head and neck should be separated from the shoulders less than an hour before death to avoid decay. It's the meat where decay started, Heseltine said, the bloody flesh that lurked underneath the placid covering. The best hunters—those most skilled in taxidermy—will perform a caping in the field. Of course, so many others merely drove the day's-decayed carcass to the taxidermist's door. They expected magic to happen at that point. They expected the gangrene that had set in around the trophy's eyes and mouth to be scrubbed clean absent of any pock-marks or subcutaneous disfigurement.

For a proper caping to be commenced with—and this was the evening's first crucial point—a knife as sharp as the vengeful Lord's canines should be employed and relentlessly.

"Six slit rule at all times," Dr. Heseltine said, referring to the point he had made in the class before last. According to Rodney, the more skilled the taxidermist, the less cuts required of him. Always six slits including the circle cuts around the front legs would be the greatest amount needed. The idea was to never relent once the knife was engaged. One wanted to form perfect circles with one's knives. The most elusive aspect of the taxidermist's art was to create the impression that the hide was always as it was being presented while strapped onto an artificial frame. That it was

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independent of a biology underneath its exterior was part of the challenge. The trophy needed to be partitioned entirely from the violence of its creation. It needed to be banished into some artificial realm of timelessness. It was not an artifact of death so much as a promise of eternal life.

Also, it was a certification of the dominion of its creator/murderer.

A finely wrought specimen made one believe in the fairytales of organized religion. That humanity was not of the animal kingdom. But rather a certain species of low-living angel whose rightful destiny was immortal bliss. The proof of this was in the deathless stare of the creature it murdered for sport. Perhaps God had the taxidermized heads of men displayed on His study's walls. Perhaps these were so life-like that you could stare at them and believe you were them, staring back at yourself unto an infinite regress.

Rodney Heseltine counseled you all that any more than six cuts and you were doing the work of butchers, not angels if only inadvertently.

"You all want to draw close to see this," he said to the class making his first cut which was surprisingly in the upper part of the chest just behind the forelegs. The depth of the cut was relatively unimportant. It was made only to avoid the knife's intercession with a vital organ or large artery and the subsequent staining of the fur above it. Once the juices began to escape from the corpse, there was an accident waiting to happen. Below the rack from which the stag was hanging, Dr. Heseltine had placed a silver gut bucket with a forty-gallon capacity. He had thought of everything. He knew more about what he was doing in this regard than any man on earth.

"Ideally you don't spill a drop. But it never is ideal," he said to you after his knife was temporarily idled. Then began the slow process of rolling up the hide neck-wards on the carcass. The bisecting cut just above the shoulders that would

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enable the capping had yet to be made. For demonstration purposes, he was taking it in slow stages. He was trying to give his students a sense of the arduous work surrounding taxidermy. Of course, this was only the first step. He was trying to enable the notion that the taxidermist was to a certain degree a type of depreciated God. There was nothing inside his creations. But outside there was a vital illusion. With this in mind, a certain mindset was all important. This was not butchery to any degree. And if anybody said it was Dr. Heseltine would gladly put down his knife and remove his rubber gloves and punch the so-and-so in his goddamn face repeatedly until he cried uncle or was unconscious and then they could be thrown to the curb and forgotten about altogether. He was a perfectionist and didn't suffer fools gladly.

II.

All throughout the sleepless night that followed this demo (and even the one after the abiding image that was making itself known to you) came the moment after the sixth cut had been rendered. This was when the physical act of separating the stag's head from its body was underway.

"He took him by the antlers like that's what they were made for (a handle) and gave a twist," you said to the resident counselor on duty at the Royal Free Clinic, corner of George and Royalton in downtown Thunder Bay, an unrepentant druggie named Bobby Chance. "As if that's what they were made for," you said to him again, "as if it lived entirely for the moment of decapitation. Something natural and native to it," you said to him of the capping. Then you lit a cigarette. "Well something like what? Warfare or something maybe. Or self-protection at least. It was disturbing to me to witness it from up close is all I'm saying to you. The ease with which it was

Gut Bucket Blues 97

done," you said to Chance who with his bushy hair and well-developed goatee reminded you of a white version of Hung, the Arkansas prisoner you had been friendly with back in Leavenworth. He had the same sort of look as Hung, but the personalities were radically different. Hung was engaging enough while Bobby Chance was something of a cold fish. Couldn't blame him at least initially for being this way, as he had a wife and family to support back in Toronto. He was out here hanging out with a disturbing amount of mostly ex-pat Americans trying to make things right with his own brain chemistry. He wasn't a doctor, a psychologist, or any sort of mental health professional. He was mostly here to lend an ear to men who could do little more than talk. He didn't have for the most part any drugs to give them. If he had drugs to give them, he wouldn't have anyway. He was here more or less to kill times in between highs.

To separate a head from the body properly, according to Dr. Heseltine, you had to twist it quickly so as to shatter the spinal column that it was still attached to.

"I heard the bones crack and became sick to my stomach," you said to Bobby looking at him directly to see if he found any of this funny. You were admitting this to him as a type of expiation for sinful acts. In the same way that a man might admit that he had had sex with barnyard animals. You were ashamed of your nausea, involuntary as it was. You assumed maybe there was some treatment for the depravity behind the response. There was something wrong with you that needed to be explained, if only to yourself. You were, nevertheless, convinced somehow that it wasn't your fault.

When you told him all about how you felt, however, Bobby Chance didn't react as expected.

"You hear of any fresh sources out there?" Bobby asked you as if you hadn't spoken to him about your pain, your moral failings. Part of Bobby's moustache was falling out because of the impurities in the smack he was shooting.

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Thunder Bay, Ontario was at the very end of the drug supply chain. He was having problems even getting a buzz off the weed he smoked so loaded as it was with filler.

Increasingly Bobby came down here to pick up information related to new drug suppliers from the troubled souls he counseled. He believed himself in the middle of nowhere, so he needed contacts. Timbuktu, he imagined, would have been a more fecund environment for getting wasted regularly than Thunder Bay. There was no real scene north of Toronto as far as Bobby was concerned. He knew this well because he had been forced to drive out here by himself one day in the middle of a blizzard while suffering from withdrawal. His wife at the time was pregnant with their second child. There was nothing here for him that would have treated him. He had to crash and start all over a month later.

"It's a fucking exile up here," he told you playing with the marbles he kept in his pocket. "I live for the day Margie and I can return to civilization."

The only real escape for an ordinary man with anything going on for him upstairs was to delve into drink and drugs as much as the body could take and even a little past that point.

"I noticed your marking," Bobby told you, pointing out the tattoo of the disembodied deer head on your upper right forearm. "And the similarities it has to your sad story. Which to me signifies a rich fantasy life on your part. Which to me also signifies that you made the whole thing up from jump street."

He waited for a violent response from you. As to him you seemed liked the type for whom violent responses would come naturally like a jazz musician riffing on a melody.

"You were wasted on something and this was the vision you had," he continued seconds later. "Don't matter what the vision is or even if you remember it now," he said. "The important thing is that you believed it was real at the time."

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Which means in my judgment that you're fucked up beyond repair. You're an auto wreck waiting for the cops to arrive. Which also means according to me that you're one of us. A denizen of the night. You probably sleep on your own marijuana pillow at night next to a toy dump truck full of cocaine. Yes, you have great potential as my friend and benefactor. You probably have something to sell to me too if I could come up with the scratch. I'm not blaming you for it. Quite the contrary. I mean, you're living your life to the fullest. It's the American way. You're a stranger up here like we all are. This land never loses its strangeness even to natives, even to the goddamn Eskimos a thousand miles north. You're never at home here when you're sober. You never look at the empty fields they have around here when you're straight and think this was what I've always wanted for me and my family. That this is where I fucking belong! You're not a freak like some of the apple-cheeked residents I see running around here who actually seem to enjoy their lives. I ask them why. And they say to me it's the wide-open spaces. It's all they care about, the absence of everything. They're nihilists deep down and I refuse to associate with any of them. They're better off dead, if you want my personal opinion about it."

Bobby Chance had a fresh package of foreign cigarettes, a product of Brazil. He opened them slowly and offered one to you merely to see if you were buying anything he said.

"You're an active participant in my kind of fun even though you might not admit it yet," he told you. "Uppers and downers, I have, screamers and laughers, too," Bobby Chance said and stroked the bald spot on his moustache thoughtfully. He wanted to talk about getting high as it was the next best thing to getting high. He had plans for you beyond listening to your problems. He had already decided you were the coolest person he had met down here.

Gut Bucket Blues 100

He had a philosophy of drugs and he wanted to share it with you, if only to see if you would concur. He thought you and he were simpatico oddly. Your drug of choice was alcohol. You disliked uppers, for example, because they tended to sober a man up slightly.

"There's not one drug really that's better than another," Bobby Chance told you. "It's like rating your breaths individually. The greatest drug ever created would be the one that kept you high for good," he said. "Well, it doesn't exist. If it did exist it would take you to a land that looks nothing like this land and keep you there forever. It would build you a house out of gingerbread with pink frosting gutters. And a giant chocolate drop for where the shitter should be."

Better living through chemistry was Bobby Chance's credo. This was an anachronism from the 60's but one which Bobby Chance couldn't seem to disavow no matter how much time passed. But until better living through chemistry occurred, Bobby Chance was fucked. His straight job was as a teller in the morning shift at the Royal Bank of Scotland on Hamilton Street. Increasingly, he needed to be high to perform it. Increasingly, the site of normal people alarmed him greatly. He thought straight folks had telepathic abilities. Increasingly, he saw the need to separate himself from the herd as if they were inflicted with some type of contagion that required immediate quarantine.

His plan was to stay in Thunder Bay for the winter and split for Vancouver in the spring. Where he had heard the drug supply was multi-foliate and copious. Vancouver was a port town and a place to get wasted in for good. Or die trying.

"You can come with me if you're up for it," Bobby Chance told you, watching with strange intensity you smoke the Brazilian cigarette he had given you. You weren't doing it right, maybe. Or doing it too right to not attract suspicion

Gut Bucket Blues 101

from a guy like him who was above all else a budding paranoid afraid of RCMP narcs.

You didn't understand why the offer was extended. You thought Bobby might be a fag trolling for a quick one.

"Listen, you can keep that shit to yourself. It doesn't affect me," you told him. "It doesn't appeal to me no matter how drunk I get."

The truth of the matter was Bobby had no sex drive to speak of ever since getting into smack. If he had been listening, he wouldn't have understood what you were getting at. What's a faggot anyway but another potential dope fiend who has yet to discover the joys of chemically-induced abstinence? As for your distress at seeing the stag's neck broken, nobody but you saw the possession of a squeamish nature as being any sort of sin. Normal people didn't equate a minor bit of empathy for a woodland creature with a fundamentally weak constitution. They were not you and never would be.

Chance had invited you along to Vancouver principally because he saw you as a potential source of protection within a subculture that had over the last year or so rapidly degenerated into something less than the hippie idyll that entirely benighted souls (like Bobby had once been) imagined it would be from the outside.

"It's all the goddamn American influence come up here fleeing from the War," Bobby said more or less accurately, at least of the grungy scene down in Toronto. According to him, Americans were crazy troublemakers and he didn't care if he offended you even slightly when he said it. He said that with all these damn draft dodgers came notions that men should just be allowed to take what they wanted regardless of the consequences. These were men without a country, after all. They had a roughness that ordinary Canadian boys lacked even when they were attempting to be tough. They didn't share their stashes with anybody, for example, even when

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offered fair value in exchange. More to the point was that they didn't hesitate to screw a man over for little reason. He thought it was just their way or something in the water down there in the lower forty-eight.

Some of these ex-pats had handguns that they were toting around the streets of Toronto. They didn't belong here was the long and short of it, Bobby thought. Godspeed to them returning to their wretched country when amnesty was finally granted to them. When it happened, it would be tragic. The men up here were all rank cowards and deserved far worse. To a man according to Bobby the draft dodgers held no strong opinions about the war they were fleeing from. They wanted to save their own necks merely. They certainly weren't good neighbors or conscientious custodians of the nation that took them in.

You were different than all of them Bobby said because, if just to believe the preamble to your deer story, you were overly brave and willful.

"You had no choice but to take flight," Chance told you lighting another Brazilian cigarette off of the first one. "Why, it was an injustice rendered against you that made you leave. You had no choice but to leave. According to you, local authorities never even bothered to ascertain your side of the story. They just saw whatsherface's wounds and that was enough for them. Unthinking really, which was as much as could be expected from government officials of a nation with such a poor track record of human rights. You're a victim as much as I am, a victim in a manner of speaking," Bobby Chance told you. "You're so unlike the Americans of Toronto it's not worth commenting upon. You can stay here another three years and become a full Canadian citizen. I don't know your future plans. They don't interest me by and large. But in the meantime, your menacing presence has great value. You can do what you want with any man who gives you trouble. You can ride along with me to the Pacific coast and simply let

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your own bad nature dictate your actions. Don't matter to me if you take a gun along with you," he said to you. "You have your own obsessions and pathologies to tend to. I understand this. Don't matter to me really if you hurt people as long as you're there when I need you and you live up to your side of the bargain."

In another room of the Royal clinic, a woman was screaming something in French about her lost child.

"Mon enfant, disparu, disparu!"

Something like that, desperately over and over as if this was an office dedicated to social services. Or it was a police station.

The tattoo on your arm of the deer head had been barely recalled by you until Bobby Chance had brought it up.

"Do you want me to explain it you," you asked him, recalling the time in reform school when Mr. Smith had revealed the first head to you. "I'm not making any of this up, I swear to you. You can go to the local college and check if you want. I can give you the name of my table partner and he can vouch for me completely."

After the demo, Ben Norgaard had come up to you in the parking lot and apologized about his reticence that evening. "We'll get together soon," he said to you and gave you his number written on a matchbook cover's inside. Somehow, he had warmed to you. Or maybe like Bobby now, he needed you for something. He was one of the least forthcoming characters you had ever met. He had no intention of prattling on.

The first stag's head, unlike the one that had been revealed to you several days before, had been sliced clean off at the neck with an electric chainsaw. Dr. Heseltine had not been there with advice about how to perform a caping properly. A part time butcher likely had done the others, indifferent to the way the trophy would hang.

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Who knew really about the quality of the memento that would be produced in that instance once the taxidermy was underway? According to Heseltine, the danger of making a neck cut near the plaque was that the hide would be torn up around the edges as a result, requiring a disguise job on the part of the taxidermist.

"They use anything they can according to him," you told Chance just to see if he was listening. "They use bits of old newspaper or felt from the inside of hats," you said. "They glue fur onto its outside and sew it in and hope it don't fall off before the check is cashed. It always looks unnatural according to him," you said, echoing Rodney's sentiment. And then you have the fact that you've lost another long-term customer in the meantime."

Bobby Chance wanted to go for coffee to discuss his Vancouver plans with you. But the only restaurant open within a reasonable distance was a twenty-four-hour Clock that served the worst sort of black swill and charged you extra for the sugar packets to kill the aftertaste.

"Over here," he said to you once inside his tiny apartment instead and stepped over a prone body on the living room floor curled up into a sleeping bag. Didn't tell you who it was or what they were doing sleeping on the floor at three in the afternoon, so you assumed it was none of your business. People had their strange ways about them constantly and drug people, that is, people who were caught up in the recreational use of hard drugs, were some of the strangest people on the planet. Amongst them you had learned to keep your mouth shut. Bobby Chance had wanted to be your friend. And quite likely he wouldn't have been able to have answered you if you asked him who it was down there.

People tended to come and go from a dope fiend's residence anonymously as if it was some sort of safe house that only similarly desperate people would venture into.

Gut Bucket Blues 105

"I'm assuming you know how to mix a speedball with the best of them," Bobby said to you, assuming something that he shouldn't have. Slowly he began to fish around in his closet for his stash. He kept it inside the alligator-skinned shoes that were in a Hush Puppy's shoebox. There were several two-ounce packets crammed into the narrow toes of the shoes as if to provide an extra layer of deception. Neither the local constabulary nor the RCMP would ever go so far as to feel around in the shoe for foreign material. The drawback was his stash sometime was tainted with foot odor. He could live with it certainly. He had adopted this lifestyle willingly and wasn't so obsessive about its nuances. He didn't think the smell was any sort of big deal.

The heroin Bobby kept in the left shoe and the cocaine in the right shoe if only because he felt the need not to be surprised about what he was snorting during a four am binge.

"Here," Bobby said to you once you had admitted that in fact you had no idea what a speedball was. He found a syringe lying in the folds of an unmade bedsheet and began to tap its side obsessively. On the nightstand, there was a brown bottle with an eye dropper in it. Bobby filled the eyedropper and squeezed whatever liquid it was filled with into the syringe from the top. He found a bit of tin foil under the bed and began to cook his smack. Eventually the potion that was in the half-filled syringe was the color of dried mayonnaise.

Bobby asked you if you wanted to shoot up. You said no. You told Bobby you wanted to see what that shit did to a man first before you imbibed. You weren't a real drug person at that point. You didn't actually know what he was fucking talking about when he prattled on about the kind of highs you got from certain drugs.

The lone piece of artwork on the wall was a poster of John Belushi posing as a Mexican bee.

"Mainlining like this," Bobby Chance told you, "generally fucks me up for a day."

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You told him you found something to do in the time that he was gone.

"Any booze on the premises," you wanted to know, already having made it into the tiny kitchen to take a look for yourself. By the time you had opened the first cupboard and started removing objects, he was far away. Speedballs worked on him like that which generally was the way they were supposed to. The potion went right to your nervous system and took over. You found it extremely hard to talk seconds after mainlining a well concocted speedball. You found it extremely hard to want to talk, that was to say.

On the drug, you entered another world by degrees. And you had no intention of responding to the one you just left as you assumed you were leaving it for good. You never left it for good, but you always assumed somehow that you had. It's what Bobby was trying to tell you once he injected. That he'd be no good to you for hours. You didn't seem to mind and even if you did it wouldn't have mattered to him. Splitsville for Bobby Chance just then. He couldn't wait to get to Vancouver and get fucked up in earnest. He had lost his zest for this life midway through 1974, just after the breakup of Bachman Turner Overdrive. It was all the same to him, the seventies. He saw no reason to carry on in the same manner even though he was married and had a child.

You wanted to get drunk off Bobby's booze if only as recompense for him not expressing sympathy over your plight. Yet there was nothing but a little vermouth and two Labatts in the fridge. Frustrated by this finding you walked over to the sleeping bag and roused the person inside. It took a while necessarily as the person in question was assumed to be sleeping something illegal off. Could be that he or she was completely sober and awake presently but not responding to your prompting. If this was the case, they were fucked altogether because you were possessed of aggressive instincts when it came to situations like these in which all societal

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controls seemed temporarily lifted. You had the back of one boot heel on the back of his or her cloaked skull and was making a circular motion as the forehead was pressed into the carpet by your weight. You were doing your best to illicit a reaction from whoever it was under there. You were impatient about getting on with the work of the day. You didn't understand what Chance wanted with you. You had been acting impulsively ever since migrating north of the border. You were searching out direction. You craved an authority figure to push up against. Up here, existence was an undifferentiated plateau. You awoke and drank beer and thought about what should be done in only general terms. It snowed three days a week and on these days you stayed inside. You stared out the window merely watching it fall, thinking how lucky you were. That you were not yet reduced to living on the streets. You felt fortunate that this was so.

Eventually, the body inside the sleeping bag revealed herself to be a teenaged girl.

She was Asian-looking, wrapped in a tartan blanket with half of her head shaved on the same side that one of her eyebrows had been shaved. This had been the side that had been pressing into the carpet when you had been lightly stomping on her head with the sole of your right work boot. She had slept on this side as if she was embarrassed there about the lack of hair.

"ngày nào là nó?" the girl said to you in Vietnamese, somewhat upset about your treatment of her. You knew enough of the language to know what she was talking about but you didn't answer. You wanted to know rather about the booze situation in this part of town. She looked fucked up slightly like she had been drinking. You wanted to know where the hooch was being kept. It was a direct question you felt that she was compelled to answer. *im l^εng l^ε nguy hil^m* as the Vietnamese Special Forces you used to work with used to

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say routinely to those being interrogated just before the appearance of the electrode and battery set.

"im l^εng l^ε nguy hil^m" you said to the girl softly enough to imply that you were at least in a general sense kidding around. You looked around the room's carpeted floor to see where her hair might have wandered off to. She might have cut it off last night while drinking whatever she was sleeping off now. Or maybe this was the way she had walked around the icy streets of this Canadian village. She was a crazy bitch and natives should not fuck with her. She was broadcasting this message to society simply because of her hairstyle. She was afraid living here alone. She felt under threat constantly.

She didn't have a gun or a man. She needed to fight for herself and she was struggling for ways constantly of being intimidating to others.

She was seventeen at the oldest and had come here at the behest of the government, riding on a bus all the way from Ottawa. This was where Canadian Special Forces had sent her from her mountain home in the borderland between North Vietnam and Laos.

Hmong, in other words. But she spoke no Hmong or any vernacular therein, as the mother she arrived with in Ottawa in the spring of 1972 had forbade its utterance even when she was the only other person in the room.

"She was afraid of spies, of the Pathēt Lao and the Viet Cong," the girl said to you who gave her name as Star once she was sitting upright on Bobby Chance's couch. *"They all hated us and were doing their best to kill us,"* she said. *"They were trying to wipe us out for good just as they were trying to wipe out each other."*

So it was in 1968 that Star and her mom snuck across the border into the south where it was she was befriended by a Canadian serviceman in all the traditional ways. Soon they were at an embassy in the Canadian capitol pressing the cause of their own refugee status. The serviceman if he ever had a

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name was long out of the picture. That's OK as he was a craven sort. Star hated the cold Mother and prayed for the fall of Laotian communism daily. But, of course, they were here in exile for the remainder of their days. And remote Ontario was a sort of double exile for Star. Like you, she seemed devoid of the drive to even muster the requisite misery to affect personal change. She was stunned by the expansiveness and the vast lifelessness of the place. Wolves howled in Canada because they were forced to live in such a territory for the duration, Star believed. She didn't understand the ways of Canadians and their cloistered souls. They always seemed to be in a supreme hurry to her. She didn't understand the motives behind their self-absorption and where they were hurrying off to even on that rarest of days where the weather was non-life threatening.

She disfigured herself in protest of all that surrounded her and all that was demanded of her. Of course, she could grow her hair back at any time and use eyeliner to cover up a lack of a left eye brow. As of now she had no plans to make herself appear normal to others. If anything, ever since meeting up with Bobby Chance, she seemed veering off into considering greater attestations of her own exceptional status. She didn't see any relief coming to her. Of late she had been snorting heroin in an attempt to give herself pleasant dreams. She was thinking of taking a class in cosmetology alongside her roommate, Christine. It had been four days since she had returned to the subsidized flat that was her address of record. When she was wasted, she couldn't tell you where the flat was. She couldn't tell you if the flat was real or existed in her imagination merely as some sort of ever-shifting figment.

If this last bit was true, you would conclude that she was an ever-shifting figment dreamed up by some sort of oblivious God. The moment God was alerted to the falseness of His perceptions was the moment we all vanished from the world for good. Star was relishing the moment of her vanishing.

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She assumed it would be painless, the transitioning of being unto nothingness. She assumed it would be a transitory moment of fatigue opening into an illimitable sleep. Nothing more than an OD on some of the shit in the toe of Bobby Chance's right alligator-skinned shoe. It would be fun to experience, she thought. Assuming that she was given enough advanced notice. It would be a confirmation for her of life's at-root emptiness, of its final arbitrariness (as nothing is more arbitrary than a bad dream). Once it happened, she would be assured that her defiance in the face of common sense had not been in vain. She thought it was not worth talking about any longer at least in your presence. She thought somebody of your ilk would not understand all that she was saying.

In your bed room even now was the flag of the Soviet Union you had absconded with on your very last day as the impassive gaze of Robert Whitaker surmised your actions in preparation (one would have thought) to blink you out of existence. This was the same process that Star was describing to you. You felt some how they had been in communication with each other. You felt at some level that they were talking about the same thing.

"I'm looking for something to drink," you said to her then almost apologetically pointed to the empty bottles of Labatt's you had left in your wake on the way from Bobby's fridge. You were a simple soul just like God Himself (likely). You didn't need to be fucked with in any way. Unlike her or Robert, you didn't care so much if this world was actual or not.

Star from Laos said she had never had so much as a sip of alcohol in her life. She said she never would take a sip until the great transformation had transpired.

"Booze makes you into a monster," she said to you by way of an explanation. "It makes you weak and ugly like a worn through blanket, Star said. "Whereas heroin makes you

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small and neat like a Barbie doll. It's good for what ails you, unlike beer. It turns you to stone slowly. It makes you a better person because there's so much less of you there to have to protect."

You were about to tell her that you had no real choice but to drink. However, you didn't feel it was necessarily true.

"I'll let myself out," you said to Star who had lately seemed to have slipped into some sort of trance on Bobby Chance's sagging couch. You assumed befriending Bobby was a waste of time. All the individuals in this apartment weren't serious people (in your understanding of the term). They seemed determined to exist in the moment. Which to you seemed a like an awful type of animalistic lifestyle. No transcendence nor even thought of it for those so determined to exist in this way. The stag whose snapped neck troubled you to such a degree by contrast had never seen his own death coming. He likely had no real concept even of what death was, so caught up was he in the experience of ordinary survival. He was lucky. But at the same time also profoundly pathetic. You didn't wish to be like him. You couldn't imagine how other human beings would have a desire to live like that. There was no freedom in such meaninglessness. Moreover, there was no chance for happiness.

Star wouldn't be a bad looking girl, you didn't think, once gifted of a normal hairstyle. But you were devoid of the desire to act on any physical attraction you held towards her.

"Lock the door after me," you said to Star once out in the apartment's hall, assuming that such a building that housed such depraved creatures in one unit must house them in all units. You weren't keen after keeping either Bobby or Star safe, barely having met either of them. Merely it was the best you could do to summon a goodbye. You weren't good on social graces hardly. You rarely if ever said hello to anybody, let alone goodbye.

Gut Bucket Blues 112

Nothing but the scents of perished meals outside the apartments in this complex, termed Winter Haven, to cogitate on fruitlessly. That and the buzz of several TV's tuned into the same afternoon soap opera which was an import from the U.K. You couldn't make anything out through the British accents, not that you wanted to. It was barely after three in the afternoon and you had nowhere to go. Drinking alone had gotten to be a bore and money was getting scarce. Even up here there must have been some sort of action. Bobby Chance had promised it to you once before checking out for the day. Somebody like him couldn't be serious about anything. He couldn't be counted on to follow through.

A business card lying next to one corner read: *Services of all Types Offered*. And then provided a local number.

"Are you the gosh darned plumber," a woman in curlers wanted to know of you. Lately you had slunk down to the not quite clean carpeting in the hall, momentarily deprived of direction.

You told her you were the plumber. Then you asked about her plumbing problem. You told her your tools were in your truck. And then you asked to be let inside her domicile for a detailed look around.

III.

Two weeks later you got in an argument with an anonymous shit kicker in a shit kicker bar. He was calling you out for being a coward, a war deserter. He didn't know who he was motherfucking dealing with. He was accusing you of being something you absolutely were not.

"Fuck you," you told the shit kicker and broke a beer bottle across his pale forehead. After you did this, he stopped walking forward and grew introspective. Then, he dropped down into the sawdust covered floor of the establishment, out cold.

Gut Bucket Blues 113

Clam joint, something vaguely nautical in the tavern's theme, which, even though it was situated on a great inland sea, seemed vaguely incongruous to you. You always conceived of the north as a frozen desert at a great remove from the moderating effects of water. In all your time here, you never so much as took a walk on a pier. You didn't know if any existed in the whole of Canada.

When your victim refused to rouse himself from the floor, after thirty seconds you got scared and ran out the joint's front door. Afraid to go back to your room, you spent the night in the Thunder Bay bus station in front of a pay TV. Nothing on there but a film starring Ronald Reagan, the then governor of California. Eventually you would make a bus journey to Winnipeg and back. Nothing but whiteness would be encountered on the way you would recall to the orderly thirty years later on your death bed. Somehow this twenty-four hour-period made as great an impression on you as any of your life. Looking back, you became convinced that you had hit rock bottom. It wasn't so, but this was the impression it left upon you. This would be the point where you could change if you were a character in a Hollywood film. Find the Lord or something like that. This was where you could have reformed yourself and led a life filled with sober contemplation and hard work.

Hours off the return trip to Thunder Bay, you found yourself knocking on Ben Norgaard's unlocked door. He owned a tiny manufactured home on the outskirts of the city. He had left a message for you yesterday on the answering machine you had bought on your first day in town. It had something to do with what you were discussing the week before when the capping was on-going. He had work for you apparently. He tended to speak in riddles but this much was made clear by him. He and you had been going back and forth about it all throughout the long hours of Dr. Heseltine's demonstrations.

Gut Bucket Blues 114

The house that you soon entered was devoid of furniture entirely save for a nineteenth century love seat in the middle of the kitchen partially blocking the refrigerator door.

"Looks like you haven't slept in days," he said to you surmising your raggedy appearance in a sentence. Actually, you had slept in fits and starts in more or less twenty-minute intervals when the road underneath the Winnipeg-bound bus had allowed it. You had cut your hand on the beer bottle you had used as a bludgeon and the untreated wound stung enough to keep sleep at bay temporarily. Insomnia wasn't all that ailed you of course and, had you just rolled off a drunk's eight hours, you still wouldn't have looked your best. By now you were a full-blown alcoholic. And just recently it had started to show. Your body wasn't regulating properly. You sweated profusely in the midst of a sub-arctic chill. You didn't know when your last untroubled journey to the bathroom was.

What you said to Ben Norgaard at that moment was that you had heard worse from better. Not looking to pick yet another fight—no, it was much too soon!—nevertheless, you felt that Ben needed to get on with it. He seemed to be stalling as if the deal he was contemplating had gone sour and he was looking for the words to break it to you. He was taking his time over urgent matters. It was criminal activity you were devoted to at this point in your life. You didn't believe that there was any misunderstanding between you and Ben. You didn't believe he was so strange so as not to catch your drift about what you were proposing to him in the moments when Heseltine readied his vivisectionist's tools.

The loveseat he told you was one of a kind, purchased from the estate of an iron ore baron with a house overlooking the lake on a bluff that bore his name even now.

"The baron used to sit up long nights with his sweetheart illuminated only by a gas lamp," Ben told you slowly opening a heretofore hidden hutch, revealing the pump action

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shotguns inside. "No, never so much as a held hand or a furtive kiss stolen in the lamp's uncertain luminosity when nothing seemed real. He would have married his sweetheart most certainly if it hadn't been for the consumption which took her life just a month after the thought of a proposal floated to his thoughts' surface. After she died, of course he had little need for the loveseat. He removed it to his attic and there it sat until it was relocated in this kitchen. A memento of frustrated love. And, friend, nothing you or I do or say in the present moment would alter this truth. It's an open sore on our collective history. There's no way to regard it but mournfully. And without the sentimental adornment that tragedies of this nature routinely call out for."

Winchester 20-gagues these shotguns with four extra shells duct-taped to their wooden handles. There was no need to inspect the weapon according to Ben as the weapons were already found to be reliable and fully loaded. They were devoid of flaw, according to him. They might as well have been angels' swords.

"Ammo is two and three quarters of an inch slug, guaranteed to kill," Ben told you moving to the back door. He wanted you to hold the barrel of your gun downward as you walked outside so as not to upset the neighbors. Apparently, there was a good deal of vigilantism in the area. Ben Norgaard wanted you to be cool like he was.

He didn't trust you with a loaded shotgun strolling behind him and he said as much to you. But you were behind him anyway. Maybe he had taken pity on you and given the work. But he made it clear that you were not the type of person he would hand a loaded shotgun to and expect it to turn out Happy Ever After in the manner of a Disney-fied fairytale.

You thought you were going out in the snow for a stroll. But, in fact, it was only to the communal garage that was kept at the end of the vacant field next door.

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"The place where we're going to is way out there," Ben said to you once you were both inside the cab of his truck. "It has a name, but it's not called by anything. It has a name, but nobody knows what it is. So people just come and go from there and don't think they've been anywhere as there's no name to attach to the place. They don't think that anything that happens there counts for anything cause there's no name. It is a place where strange things happen. Nobody wants to admit to all the awful things in their heart. They go to this place to do these things and not be seen, even by themselves. They're always alone up there. Even if it's some kind of party that's taking place, hundreds of eyes are upon them, they're all alone. It doesn't make a difference the way you feel about life. Once you're there you're free to do as you please. I've seen it myself close-up. I've seen the way people act once they're assured they can get away with murder."

It was a ninety-minute drive almost due north from Thunder Bay to this place. It was up a two-lane road that became a dirt road that became, with six miles to go, a narrow path in a shallow snowfield cut there almost entirely, one would suppose, by traffic headed to and from this magical destination. For the last half mile, even this tenuous bit of infrastructure disappeared. Ben Norgaard was forced to maneuver his truck over a foot-deep virgin snowfield oblivious to what resided underneath it. He had his head out the window like a dog as the windshield kept icing up. He seemed to have, nevertheless, a firm grasp of where he was headed. He seemed to know this place better than his own neighborhood in Thunder Bay.

Once a quivering tree line of Douglas firs was encountered in the snowfield's midst, Ben Norgaard put the car in park.

"Better maybe to stop back where the tracks ended a half mile back," you said to him pulling the duct tape off your gun. "That way, they wouldn't know we are close."

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According to Ben, however, they wouldn't care if they even knew.

"They might as well have been blindfolded and gagged," Ben said to you about the populous that they were preparing to do extreme damage to shortly, if only to judge by Winchesters in their possession.

Ben told you that the make of the gun was chosen for a reason. This was its accuracy and power from long range.

"That's a gosh darn moose slug inside the chamber in case I didn't mention it," he said to you once outside the cab and pleaded with you once more to point the barrel downward. Just ordinary safety etiquette as far as he was concerned. Also, he didn't trust you so much with a loaded gun. He assumed that a man like you never bluffed as regarded violent matters. He assumed that whenever someone like you pointed a rifle at another man's head, that man was as good as dead.

It all fed into a common pathology, he told you. Which was that over time this area had come to be a sort of encampment for those who were fixing to die.

"It's two hundred dollars a kill if I haven't already told you. Which I think I have," he said to you and removed his baseball cap on his head that advertised an herbicide for wheat. *Grow Full Beards*, read the advertising copy below the illustrated bundle. Then below that there was an uncertain spot that likely didn't belong to the ad at all.

Everything's been thought of in advance, according to Ben. For you, he said, it's just a matter of pulling the trigger.

"Also," he told you, "you're going to need to take a picture. Of the face, of the dead face. Of what you've done," he said. "That's what they want," he said. "I'm saying the guy who's paying you for this. That's what *he* wants. As proof of what you did or didn't do. He claims he can tell absolutely whether a man is alive or dead by the face alone. Something about the face, the way it's twisted in death. He's a

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strange guy, certainly. But he claims his intuition is real and I don't complain about it. He's good for payment, that's all I know. He's strange about everything except when it comes to paying his debts which he does promptly and without complaint. He claims to have magic powers or some such balderdash. An evil warlock or something of that ilk. But he wants the photos you make for proof beyond anything else."

The bulky Polaroid camera Ben had given you on the way over and made you wear around your neck seemed suddenly more than a type of bit of rueful whimsy executed for no reason.

"Push the red button on top," Ben told you pointing to his own camera. "After that you take the photo out of the slot and blow on it a little to dry it. He has a low tolerance for sloppy film work, this guy," Ben Norgaard told you. "Face needs to be centered remember," he said. "He don't care so much if there's blood or what have you along the edges. He don't care if you do a sloppy job in getting the job done."

On the tree line's other side, there were tents placed at three hundred yards intervals.

"Most of 'em are asleep anyway so don't bother to knock," he told you, not that this was your intention to begin with. It was a preposterous act to feign politeness to another human seconds before you put a slug into his or her face. Moreover, the element of surprise would be lost if that occurred. Out on patrol, during your first tour, you had experienced firsthand the need to be cunning in such circumstances. A young woman in a fishing village had produced an AK-47 out of her sling rather than a feeding infant. In such situations, you were better off not being seen. You took another human like you would take an elk. There was no machismo in situations related to ordinary murder. In such situations, one was forever focused on living another day.

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Best way to go about this would be to barge in quickly and point and fire. But the tents' fragility argued against the making of sudden movements. If one of them escaped, they would jump up and warn the others invariably. You assumed the best course was a methodical progression from one tent to the next. If they were asleep, they wouldn't detect the rifle's report coming from hundreds of yards off. You thought your part of this could be done within the space of twenty minutes. You didn't think anybody would have to be chased after. You genuinely thought everything was set up to go so smoothly as if it was what people wanted to happen. Maybe you were killing them with their consent. Maybe this was what Ben had been hinting at, that this was a camp for prospective suicides. They went to sleep and they didn't wake up. Maybe *they* were the ones paying you for services rendered.

You thought there might have been a trick to all of this, a literal catch placed on the tent's flap, for example, that would actuate some terrible retribution against you for what you were attempting.

"Wipe your feet first," a small voice said to you upon your entering the cramped space. There was a cot in the corner visible by starlight through the mesh draped over the entrance. You assumed this was where the voice was coming from. You assumed, furthermore, that whoever it was turned toward the tent's entrance. They were fucking around or something like that. They had to know what was about to happen to them. They had to have been possessed of concerns apart from the ordinary maintenance of objects that did not belong to them.

You were on the verge of losing it, on the verge of simply sticking the barrel of the Winchester into the tent's opening and firing blindly. Something about the voice was all too familiar to you not to be taken by you as a threat. This you assumed was intentional. You assumed it was Ben Norgaard's attempt to get back at you for a slight that might

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have taken place during the taxidermy demos. You were both working on the same models at once, for example, and perhaps one of Ben's suggestions for improvements in the head's mounting went unheeded by you. You were cold like that, uncivil like that so routinely that those very few people who had gotten close enough to you to be considered intimates had assumed the characteristic as innate. Somebody would have had to tell you if this was the way you were behaving, as the response was so inbred that you weren't aware you were doing it.

Off in the distance you heard a rifle report and you assumed this was from Ben Norgaard firing into the air and waiting for you to come out and have a laugh at your expense.

"I'll do as I wish anyway, thanks," you said to whoever it was in the tent with you and pointed the rifle at the first bit of exposed skin you saw in the near total darkness and fired.

This rifle had a bit of a kick to it that you weren't precisely prepared for as you were so used to the relative smooth recoiling Remington 870. It didn't matter, however, as the slug found its way home. You felt the blood aerosol emanating from the newly formed wound waft over to you. This triggered you to approach the cot. It was a woman's body you discovered lying there with a presently deformed countenance. The slug had impacted with her face dead center on the bridge of the nose and instantly caved in the entire structure. The secondary shock wave emanating from this pit had dislocated her upper jaw. Which in turn was enough to knock the entirety of the front teeth out. Presently these lay on the pillow next to her mixed in with the gathering blood pool, dagger-shapes pieces of bone from the jaw itself and the sinus cavity that had cracked and splintered within the third hundredth of a second after the slug's penetration.

Underneath the mask of blood the woman now wore, the right eyebrow had come loose aligned perpendicular to the eye on the sticky forehead. Hard to say what state her hair

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was in before you had shot her but presently it was a fucking mess. It didn't look like any woman you had ever met certainly, either before or after. Presently she would have been unrecognizable to even her husband and children (if either of these existed). Looking at her by the light of a match, you couldn't see any sort of likeness to anything human. There was a distant resemblance to a particular red-faced clown once witnessed by you at a Shrine circus. This vision had caused you consternation while as a small child. You severely doubted this woman and the clown were of the same brood, however. You didn't think that the same level of facial disfigurement was present in that buffoon. You didn't think back then that you were as repulsed by the image as you were now.

With the rifle's butt end you turned the head upwards on the pillow. Then you leaned over and took the photo.

The flash briefly came to life and illuminated the face in a white silver glow then. You felt the edge of the picture appear in the Polaroid's back slot like a bit of stool sliding from a dead body. Pulling the image from its tray, you slowly backed out of the tent keeping your eye on the cot all the while. Vaguely you were interested to see if there was some consistency to the image in front of you. You wanted to see if any of this was make-believe as you had tended to think. You had been sliding closer to insanity by degrees and this was the tipping point. The photograph presently in your pocket would be revealed to be nothing more than an image of your own face twisted up in a mask imitating a woman with a hole where her nose should have been. It was possible, given the circumstances you found yourself in. You didn't know Ben Norgaard from Adam, for example. Ordinary logic would suggest that he was not here to do you any favors.

You were convinced that if you simply sat still long enough the vision in front of you would change as illusions were by their nature transitory.

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"The snow still feels like snow to me," you said to yourself ten minutes clear of the tent. You found a stump out on the tree line to squat down on. Once there, you picked up the polaroid that had been developing all this while, slowly as it might within the darkened conditions.

Jesus Saves read the sign above the woman's cot that for obvious reasons you had been ignorant of during your stalking. It was a little yarn brocade that chances were the woman took with her wherever she might venture. It was a superstition with her likely. She would not sleep anywhere without it hanging over her bed. It was supposed to protect her from demons such as yourself likely. But it had proven utterly ineffective. Fucking thing had needed to be formed from extruded steel and bent over her face with drilled perforations in it to have served as a proper shield. Even then she likely wouldn't have made it out of here alive. As you were cool enough in such a situation to have checked your handiwork thoroughly and shot her in the guts on the second go around.

But the sign's presence was a telling detail that let you know that everything was not the way Ben had characterized it. You could wait around for a while to see if anything would change, to see if any other information in the developing photograph would be revealed. The best course for you would be to get hammered by yourself and pass out. Once unconscious, you would enter an innocent state. You would be free of the awful facts of the present moment. And then you could begin to deny the reality of what had taken place here altogether.

Booze was regrettfully missing from the scene. You had the thought of rifling through Norgaard's truck for some but assumed that the truck was gone. You assumed the next sound you would hear would be a RCMP police siren. It had all been a set up, you now believed. You didn't think there was any two hundred dollars coming your way ever.

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You shut your eyes and tried to sleep, bracing yourself against the cold and the weirdly insistent image of yourself twenty-five years on with a tube up your nose in a hospital charity ward. This was a future memory experienced by you as a vision. You had no idea about its significance in the present age. Everything had already happened in your life apparently and you were a simple memory of a dying man you had not met and never would. You were instead condemned to recall this man's life in bits and pieces up to the end. Nobody would be good enough to put a slug through your face like you had done with the woman back in the tent. People nowadays were not as decent as this. They had their own needs and obsessions to fulfill before the needs of others. They weren't compassionate in the way that you were compassionate, at least when it came to the alleviation of personal suffering. Nobody loved you like you loved yourself. And this was likely why the visions inside of you were ceaseless. You were the only person that you could relate to consistently. You saw yourself as your own savior and experienced the holy visions accordingly. But it was always a vision in which you suffered further. There was never any relief from your own love. It was so unlike Christ's love which was rumored to be the epitome of relief. For you it was always like staring in a particularly gruesome funhouse mirror. Nothing changed with you afterwards. You were always pulled back into yourself absent of the ability to escape later.

Made groggy with dread, you fell off the stump once and clambered back on. Your feet had gone numb by this point and the thought occurred that you might be in the process of contracting hypothermia. You wondered how long you had to be out here for it to take effect completely. Maybe you could hasten it by diving into the snow and burying yourself in it. Or perhaps, as you had once heard, this was merely a way to warm up and stay alive a little while longer.

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You thought to close your eyes and see what happened to you. Eventually the waking visions stopped, and you were calm.

An elk of all creatures happened by when you had your eyes closed. It sniffed warily at the folded-up polaroid staring impassively at the terrible image at its center.

It sniffed thoughtlessly at an overgrown patch of thistle pulling up from the snow and took a bite.

Every now and then, a gunshot could be heard sounding from a mile away. It barely effected the elk's progression over the snow. Eventually it too was gone for good. The wind blew and its tracks disappeared. And you never realized it was there the entire time.

1979: Jerusalem

I.

For years afterward you moved along the northern rim of the Great Lakes, moving through towns unsullied either by streetlights or ordinary hospitality, executing a generally clockwise progress. Always you were in the same frame of mind that you had entered during the incident north of Thunder Bay. You didn't believe you were yourself anymore (as the cliché ran). You felt your own soul as a set of loose-fitting clothes, rather, stolen from another man's closet. It was a creative act to assume it had belonged to you ever. During those years you were always making excuses for the experienced incongruities.

By 1979 your old self had returned temporarily, descending on you mysteriously at one moment as the Holy Spirit had on Christ's disciples during the feast of Pentecost. You were standing on a Royal Oak, Michigan street corner as it happened, watching fools mourning the passing of an objectively evil man.

You would have denied the connectedness of these two events if it ever had occurred to you. You saw your internal landscape as at any utter disconnect from current events, however. You saw this schism as having taken place back in reform school during one of Father Cancer's beatings when something had come loose for good.

At the Shrine of the Little Flower, corner of Twelve Mile and Woodward, the body of the Fascist Father, Charles Edward Coughlin, was waiting to be adored by a crowd of white-haired Catholics having formed a line that stretched past a third of a mile. You and your brother Bob were there acting as security for the shrine. The compensation for your services was a bowl of split pea soup that tasted of used gym socks and something else unclean. Also, there was a tiny gold stick pin that they gave you bearing the likeness of Little Flower and the gruesome face that haunted her. Later you would maybe pawn this for the price of another bowl of soup. This time it would be chicken noodle. And the gym sock flavor would have been completely removed.

"According to her, to Little Flower, she would see Christ's face wherever she went," Bob told you staring at the pin and the floating image of the Savior's agonized visage that seemed to move about the pin's surface when held at different angles. "According to her, Christ could be on me at any time or on you like an overhead projector. She would never know where the face settled at any moment. Could be on a fucking malamute for all she knew. It would just be there at one point, riding somebody else's face like a mask. To her this meant that JC's love was in everybody. But to me this meant she was past the point of no return in terms of her devotion. Over the fucking edge. She didn't distinguish anymore between realness and make believe, St. Therese. Probably she thought reality was for losers. Jimmy, just like you," Bob said and smiled. "Maybe that's your problem all along. You're an undiscovered saint! You think you're fucked up but it's not true! You get with the church, with these lunatics and grifters, and do your P.R. And then you'll have all the wine you want to drink forever and what's more a soft place to lay your head at night for the duration. The pussy you're on your own about, I think. I think there's an art to plausible denial in such an institution and you can learn to master it over time. I think

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eventually you'll forget that there is such a thing as being a man of the cloth at all."

According to Bob, the sainthood racket was a scam as old as gullibility itself. But regardless of his exhortations, you thought you were all wrong for it.

"For starters," you said to him. "You have to believe in God, don't ya?"

Well, at least for a little while. At least at first you thought you'd be obliged to believe the bullshit that the True Church was slinging to the masses.

Bob said to you that belief and disbelief were meaningless words when being considered for the mind of a schizophrenic like St. Therese, aka "Little Flower."

"Hard to say what a loony toon really thinks of things, where her heart lies when taking into consideration that her mind was not her own. Maybe she would cure herself and become an atheist or some sort of drum-beating Buddhist, convinced of the impermanence of the Real. She was being honest about her delusions. It don't count for much, Jim, as far as my way of thinking goes," Bob told you. "You either can see things the way they are or you can't," he said. "And if you can't, you need to be fucking locked up, if only for the good of others. I'm asking you to see the world the way I see it, Jim. It don't matter how pure your heart is, man, if your brains have been fried. I'm asking you to look into your heart at the minute and affirm with me that this is true."

You thought about what Bob said as much as you could, given your lack of interest in the subject. Your own Little Flower pin must have been incorrectly manufactured, as the disembodied Christ-face of Little Flower's (perhaps) diseased imaginings was frozen in place, hovering near what looked to be a crudely drawn heaven with no worshipers paying any attention to him at all.

"I see what you're saying," you said to him, "but I can't think to agree or disagree with you straight off. Unlike you,"

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you told him, "I haven't really given it much thought. Deep down, I don't have much of a taste for religion. I can't see myself ever getting into it even if my life depended on it."

It was an honest sentiment you thought and confirmed by immediate experience. Looking out over the precipice between the mind and the universe, you detected only void, nothing nearly complex enough to be assumed as conscious. You thought it was a shame really, but this was the way it was. You didn't see yourself as temporarily depressed as any fervent adherent might believe you were when such views were expressed to them in the slow rhythm usually reserved to calm a lunatic. Whatever mental malady you had suffered through while up in Canada was presently dissipated. Might have been simply emigrating back to the States that had snapped you out of it. But at any rate you were your old self. Presently you were back in your home town looking to make a fresh start. You had no prospects as usual except for the scams Bob was proposing to you daily. You were thirty-one but was routinely assumed by strangers as somebody at least forty. You had gone doughy at the middle and your hair was falling out steadily. It took you time to answer on the rare occasions you were spoken to directly. You were drunk every night. And except for your brother there was not a single person in the metro area who knew you well enough to address by his first name.

The visitation you and Bob were assigned to was scheduled to last eight hours. But all had been promised a peek of Father Coughlin before the coffin was sealed for good.

"He must have been a motherfucking monster," you said to Bob on the occasion of one woman near the line's front fainting dead away as her turn came, "for so many dumb people to have loved him this well."

Despite his notoriety, Coughlin once was silenced by the Roosevelt administration and threatened with charges of

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treason. Afterwards, he had kept a low profile up until the hour of his death.

"I bet that whore would suck the chrome off a fender if given half a chance," you told Bob as the unconscious woman in a very circuitous way returned to the land of the living. "She's gaga for him. Even though like all the rest she knows him only by reputation."

Indeed, in all the time spent in the nearby Catholic reform school, the only glimpse you had ever had of America's radio priest, Charles Coughlin, was when he was in private consultation with Father Canner just after a beating of a sixth form had finished.

"What I remember is both of their hands were red with the boy's blood," you said to Bob and readjusted the armband they made you wear when standing out here. The image on its cloth's exterior was a white background with a black crucifix in its center. Apparently, the Church wanted to remind you what religion you were partaking in when you attended this ceremony. Alternately it was a type of branding exercise. You were always in the presence of God according to them when such a symbol was near. It was a variety of mindfuck of which corporations were intimately familiar.

Like the McDonald's arches, the Catholic logo infiltrated a man's dreams once having been exposed to it past a tolerable point. There it anchored itself to the imagination. Some devout Catholics could never be absent of a cross for more than a few hours at a time. They had no explanation for why this might be the case.

As far as Father Cancer's hands, these had been constantly blistering because of the heaviness of the rod he used. For these such a crimson shade was understandable. Father Coughlin apparently bled from the palms constantly in sullen imitation of the Lamb of God. He saw no purpose behind applying a bandage to his wounds. Aloud you wondered if

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he was a holy bleeder, affected with the stigmata in the manner of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina.

"The nuns menstruate and he probably likes to finger them," Bob told you, offering an alternative explanation for the blood. Could have been the case even though the two nuns at the school were post-menopausal. There was Maeve the Slave of course to consider in this calculation. But not surprisingly you had not considered her. The victims of this world were utterly forgetful creatures to you by this point, tainted with ignominy and the shameful passivity that their weakness engendered. Father Coughlin, just like Father Cancer, however, was anything but weak. Even the glimpse you had gotten of him had a made a deep impression. You assumed at some point he was hell-bound, cursed with an insect-level understanding of morality while in human form and profoundly dangerous, reclining with legs crossed in a long-backed chair. His hands were bloody and, just beneath the blood, feminine. You looked into his eyes and he realized all his secrets instantaneously. He was somebody from the realm of dreams.

At the shrine entrance, there had been a loudspeaker set up piping many of the Father's greatest hits, so to speak, from his enormously popular radio show of the 1930s:

There is only one avenue of escape for the downtrodden American people and that avenue lies not on the highway of the Democratic and Republican parties, for both are one, the left wing and the other right wing of the same bird of prey, the vulture; for the same thing, the banker.

"J-ew-es," you said to yourself, saying it the way Coughlin said it through the scratchiness of the acetate recording. He said it as three syllables as if the word was so vile so as to die when encountering the silver of his tongue and needed to be slid off it in stages like the dead bug on a windshield. You had no idea what he was on about in this speech and assumed in its increasingly manic tone that he was barely aware of his

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speech's content as well. He was at his worst when he was at his most eloquent. Which was to say, when revealing most thoroughly the necrotic contours of his heart to the masses.

He hated J-ew-es and wished to see them removed from the planet apparently. He seemed to find no issue with such sentiment and the existence of a Loving God that he insisted had sent his only son (a Jew!) to pay for the sins of the world. He spoke for God and Nazis both at such moments and had no intention of attempting to prioritize which of these entities was of superior rank. He would have been delighted apparently to have the Holocaust transplanted to America, would have donated his basilica's facilities to aid in the effort of Jew-extinction if his archbishop could be convinced to do so. It would have been a holy effort according to him, albeit one enabled by Hunic heathens. He was a pragmatist in such matters involving the nexus of spirit and flesh. He conceived of a desired end and he was indifferent about the matter of its attainment. If, after having been silenced for good by the Roosevelt administration, he had devoted himself to politics fulltime, few keen observers would have been surprised. The work of the anti-Semite called out to him with greater volume than the work of the Christly shepherd. A man for his age, in other words. Somehow people were lonely for that era. Not all of the visitors to you seemed insensate and otherwise brain-addled. But the past with its gleaming certainties called out to them. They were mournful of time's progression more so than mournful of Father Coughlin's passing. The J-ew-es had burned *en masse*. But ordinary men were still not saved. It was still bitter cold out here, for example. And many of them were in the throes of a severe and abiding constipation.

Every so often a mourner's legs would buckle, overburdened as they were by their infirmities and the stress associated with standing outside mostly still for consecutive hours to view a heroic relic.

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"We're always hep to lend a helping hand," Bob said to you, when spying one such specimen a block away begin to sway on suddenly watery ankles and hold up her arms sideways (which might have been an attempt to regain her balance or might have been in callow emulation of that superhero of superheroes, Jesus Christ, while in training for his crucifixion).

A decades-long pussy bandit with an exotic taste for grannies, Bob fancied this zaftig sexagenarian. She had an ass that needed to be crowbarred into nylon pants and a modified beehive doo. She was somebody he was immediately attracted to the minute she began to sway. Liked 'em overripe, Bob, like his bananas. The superficial rot on the outside guaranteed the caramelized sweetness within. Bananas weren't ripe bananas unless you could suck 'em down with a straw. Bob would fuck these grannies and they would literally go out of their minds with desire for him. They would cry and fart and moan and tear their hair out and dig their nails into his back. He liked that about them, the way they gave themselves to him. He was mushy inside himself and needed constant validation. He needed not to be just admired but adored.

He would, he supposed, have to walk over there at some point and seduce.

"I have soup at home, boy," was how he put it to you regarding his own motivations for working the line. "I'm really in it for the gash only."

Just like you, he lacked religious feeling utterly.

"As to the matter of why we are all alive," he said, "I haven't given it a whole lot of thought."

What Bob liked to do at instances like these was approach a woman from behind with a cloud of cologne acting as a herald for his approach.

"Dear, you're a martyr in need of a purifying flame," Bob would always say to his mark on these occasions and wrap his

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arms around her waist. Gently, lovingly almost to the point that a passing stranger would conceptualize Bob as the victim's devoted son. Then he would attach himself to her backside.

His dick was rock hard by this point and protruding from his usually thin slacks. If the situation allowed it, his hands would stray upward to allow him to cop a proper feel. At this point, usually within twenty seconds, he would ejaculate and rest on the woman's neck muttering sentiments that he had conceived of as sweet entreaties to the power of her sexuality but were really just admonishments over the mess he had made in his underwear and how he would over time isolate her and make her lick the cum off of him properly at some time when he was able.

He was a born romantic. He conceived of these public molestations as evidence of his deeply wrought affection for the fairer sex.

"I get within twenty feet of them and my dick goes crazy," was how he put it to you concerning his prevision (so-called by several shrinks whose misfortune it was to render a diagnosis). According to Bob, you couldn't judge any one flavor of love as being innately superior to another. His lust in such situations was undeniable. If given time he was sure that such mania would transmogrify into real love. He thought himself in many of these cases as the real victim. Old women had a power over him. He thought himself somebody deeply susceptible and thus a perpetual victim. Old broads needed to beg forgiveness from him for the comprising position he was always being forced into because of their charms. He literally couldn't help himself. He thought at the very least they owed him any number of sexual favors once they were alone together.

Not necessarily a violent person in the same manner of his younger brother, nevertheless, Bob exuded an aura of

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creepiness about him that dwarfed even the dearly departed Father Coughlin and his Nazi-sympathizing ways.

"Tough nuts for me," he said to you when halfway over to the sexy sexagenarian's sumptuous backside. By this point the doll's burly husband appeared from the interior of a parked Buick nearby.

"He don't know how good he's got it any way," Bob said staring over at the man who was decked out in a Lyndon LaRouche sweatshirt and a camouflage hat. Squirrel hunting season was over apparently and here he was in the relatively civilized confines of Royal Oak to pay his last respects to a disgraceful man. His aging wife was his placeholder in line apparently. And he needed to revive her if only because he didn't want to start over.

Plenty more where that came from, on the other hand. Bob with his masher's consistency was never short of sex partners, involuntary though they might sometimes be.

"They want us to be pallbearers when it comes time for the burial," Bob, who had been in contact with the diocese recently, told you and quoted the payment. This was another bowl of soup and a vinyl LP of the Father's most memorable speeches pulled from the scratchy wax on which they originally preserved:

If Jews persist in supporting communism directly or indirectly, that will be regrettable. By their failure to use the press, the radio and the banking house, where they stand so prominently, to fight communism as vigorously as they do Nazism, the Jews invite the charge of being supporters of communism.

When we get through with the Jews in America, they'll think the treatment they received in Germany was nothing...

You thought what might be fun would be for you and Bob to sneak into the Shrine at some future point and disfigure Charles Coughlin's body with a hunting knife. You had

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planned to carve Stars of David into his forehead with it and render the odd moustache using liquefied dog shit.

"We could get in and out without being seen," you said to Bob who was not the type to go along with such a plan. Despite his perversions, Bob had some purchase on being a mainstream member of society. He had a law degree, for example, that kept him semi-employed all throughout his dark days. He had a more or less permanent residence in nearby Ferndale that he kept stacked to the ceiling with Marvel comics and other trappings of a wasted youth devoid of either culture or direction.

While you had been sent to reform school, Bob had matriculated in mainstream institutions. After which he had been shitted out into the workforce in the late sixties. At first seeming as just another drone in the corporate hive, eventually his perversions and general weirdness had gotten the better of him. He liked to jerk off in the seats that the secretaries had sat in at the end of meetings, for example. For days on end, he would stay in and read and re-read comic books. He had a bad habit of staring at people until they became confrontational toward him. You would ask him later why and he would not have an explanation for you. The way God made me, he would say or something similar. The fuck he knew, in reality. He had stopped seeking explanations about himself ever-since the money for the court-appointed therapist had been exhausted.

Unlike you, he had no real quarrel with the church and thought those religiously inclined were silly at the most and not the sort of wretches that needed to be attacked simply because of the perverted tendencies that their worshipfulness engendered in them.

"When this is over," Bob said to you, "we'll go get drunk. "First round's on me but only if you shut up in advance. I'm on probation you should know and my law license is up for re-consideration next year. There's a program I've signed up

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for that gives men like me a second chance. You need to read the Bible merely and spout the platitudes. I've got nothing particularly against that special brand of chicanery that the Hebrews proffered millennia ago. If religion would give me another chance, then all praise to religion! It's an empty vessel merely, a ship without a captain. But when one is in the midst of drowning, one does not question the stewardship of the ship from which a life saver is launched. At least I wouldn't," he said to you and looked over at his former quarry. She had recovered her equilibrium partially ever since the arrival of her husband.

"Jimmy," Bob said, "things happen in this life over which you and I are powerless. Finally, it's not for us to turn down a helping hand. We're morally obliged to stay alive as long as possible. We don't need to be apologetic for our avarice. In that our avarice coincides with our instinct for self-preservation. We don't need to see ourselves as aspirant angels when you and I both know most people aren't worth the sum of atoms they're made out of."

Once at the dilapidated bar and grill that they had migrated to after the soup was served, a sad-faced clown of the scary modern variety had approached them both with his tale of woe.

"The clown car I drive lacks power steering," he told you both and honked the curlicue horn dangling from his polka-dot belt. This was a fake plastic item of the same variety that was sold to various circus attendees on the way in. Neither you nor Bob could figure out why they hadn't supplied the clown with a proper brass model. According to him, it was the toll that the economy was taking. Even the oil in the clown car was ten thousand miles past being replaced. He said the clowns needed to get together and take up a fund for their own well-being. They slept in a pile on a patch of hard floor like dogs just out of reach of the big top. They weren't goddamn men anymore, just some freakish hybrid of these

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and cartoonish animals. Their entire diet nowadays was pink cotton candy stolen from the mixing bowl's deepest recesses. It rotted the teeth even as it created a type of evanescent buzz. Always one was less than the sum of one's parts in such a state. And now with a clownish demeanor and rotted clown teeth one could hardly rejoin the mainstream. A mask had been fused onto the face permanently. And grinning death (the ultimate clown) was the only sovereign left who might grant a man temporary relief.

Neither you nor your brother felt sorry for this freak owing to the fact that he was clearly inebriated at the moment of his testimony. Also was the dawning realization that nobody had held a gun to the man's head and asked him to clown. He was delusional. And now his delusions had turned noxious. According to you, that didn't make him a victim so much as somebody who had stupendously misjudged the mendacity of his fellow creatures past a point that personal happiness could be reclaimed. He had gambled and lost, so to speak. And that made him less than pathetic and something more ludicrous and worthy of scorn.

"If I take that goddamn horn and break it in two," you said to him as he had his back turned toward you, "what are you going to do? If I just take it off you and walk around behind you all day honking it, how are you going to function? You can make me part of your act maybe," you said to him. "But nobody laughs when I do shit like this. Unlike you, other people take me seriously. When I crack a joke they never even smile."

With only three drinks in you, you weren't nearly loaded. You spoke in a calm enough way to signal to folks that you were not so serious about your latest threat rendered against another human being. You'd have to have downed drink six before any of your threats held any serious weight and at least up to drink nine before you were certain to act on them. More or less sober as you were at the moment, you had less

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potential for violence than would have been the case otherwise. You had a sense of humor up to the point that somebody else could be the butt of your jokes. Really, you weren't such a bad guy absent of the fire water. This would be the exact summation a court-appointed attorney would make on your behalf within the space of a year to a slouching jury: that, separated them from alcohol, you were nearly socialized. Your brother who would act as your character witness would have good things to say on your behalf. Even one of the nuns down at The Shrine of the Little Flower remembered the way you lovingly eyed Father Coughlin when he was being transported to the grave.

Just fucking with a man who meant you no harm. This to you was lighthearted horseplay. But likely the man behind the makeup didn't see it that way hardly.

"There's no need to lock me up, do anything bad to me just because I like to make jokes," you said to Bob once back home in his barely inhabitable apartment. Well, that was merely one person's subjective opinion and Bob for himself was at pains to disagree. He had witnessed your mental degeneration over the years into someone that should be legitimately feared. You were always a sort of free spirit but never somebody truly dangerous. You didn't hurt people for the sake of hurting them but as a regrettable toll in the pursuit of ill-gotten gain. Back from Canada, you were, however, in his estimation, a harder sort entirely. Presently you were too quick with a cutting word aimed at a complete stranger. You seemed to be spoiling for a fight from anybody who would oblige you. It didn't matter if you were drunk anymore. You seemed a bully devoid of real limits. Secretly Bob was hoping you would get your lights punched out if only to create boundaries to your behavior. Likely as not such an occurrence would only make you angrier. You would feel the need to seek revenge on whoever had bested you. They would bruise you and you would kill them. You would

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believe yourself entitled to do so because of the debt you felt you were owed.

You felt the desire to take a step back. You had returned to the U.S. in an attempt to make it happen.

"I got a job interview tomorrow where I'll be on my best behavior," you said to Bob who had long since nodded off and moved back into the living room slowly to avoid toppling the seven-foot-high comic book columns. These were Bob's pride

and joy and he read them obsessively, taking one off the top then placing it on the floor to form the base of a new column. Indeed, the architecture of his rooms was constantly shifting. He had no desire to relocate to some place more spacious. He

had certainly had no desire to move his comics to a storage area as his landlord had suggested on more than one occasion.

Your job interview was at a metal shop in Hazel Park. There they would be sure to ask you about your activities in the five years since you had left the U.P. in a hurry.

"I'll tell 'em I've been sick all the while in a VA facility," you said to one comic book column that was conceived by you as a seven-foot-high swaying sentinel awaiting a reply to its silent accusation. "Not in any facility where they could check easily," you said. "Somewhere upstate, in some facility that may be closed down already. I'll tell 'em I've been bed-ridden for years," you said to the stack. "I'll show 'em my purple heart if they give me any shit about this and I'll ask to see theirs. I'll walk around like a cripple if they don't believe me and are demanding further proof."

Not that you were so stoked to work at a sheet metal manufacturer, but you felt an attraction to the con of a blue-collar existence. You could reject them, but you felt it an outrage that they should reject you first. If you were offered the job you would accept it and likely simply not show up. The thought of having to report for work regularly to such a place had filled you with an acute species of existential dread. You thought of it as kind of a living death. Like being

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conscious in the casket as it rotted in the ground. Still you felt compelled to follow through. You were tired of the marginalized existence of a semi-criminal. You admired Bob for his stolidity, if not for his perversions. At times when you were extremely hungover, you wanted an apartment and a driver's license all your own. But you were disgusted about the process that you were being forced to submit yourself to in order to achieve it. You didn't think it was fair hardly. You thought rather it was completely unfair at many levels.

Somebody like the Incredible Hulk whose exploits you were perusing by television light wouldn't take this situation lying down.

"The Hulk would just simply smash the whole place up, turn all the bricks to powder and tear people in two," you said to the shadow in front of you. "Anybody who wasn't smart enough to run from him deserved to die. But they never showed the bloodshed that the Hulk created in a kid's comic. They'll show a smashed-up building that was his handiwork, but they'll never show all the broken bodies inside. It's too horrible to contemplate close up."

Which is why you didn't appreciate comics on a par with your brother. Not anymore. Having had a taste of violence yourself, you saw the Hulk's exploits as callow in the extreme. For reasons of ordinary propriety, Marvel didn't show the real stuff, the meaningful stuff of bones jutting out from skin that jibed with your own fairly extensive exposure to violent conduct. Because of such elisions, you felt, therefore, that they simply weren't worth reading. Violent acts removed from the suffering victims that were created became too banal for a grown-up to contemplate. Somebody like Bob liked them probably because he was so generally ignorant of reality. He had never been in Father Cancer's office, for example, with his pants around his ankles. He had never been out on patrol in a Vietnamese jungle, expecting to buy the farm at the sound of every twig snap.

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Not that you were completely offended by his comic collection, but you expected that over time the more Bob had become exposed to ordinary life, the more he would be weaned from the fantasy stories. In fact, just the opposite was happening with him. The older he became, the greater his desire seemed for escape. You thought it both pathetic and understandable simultaneously. Soon he wouldn't be able to walk around his apartment as it would be taken over with comics.

Just after the job interview the next day, you caught the bus out to the state fairgrounds where the circus had set up. You had wanted, to the extent that you were capable of the act, to apologize to the clown you had harassed. You had suddenly felt the need to keep up appearances around your older brother. He was in many aspects mentally ill. At least when you were hanging around with him, you felt the need to present yourself in a better light altogether than the facts of your life dictated that you were.

The clown in question, however, was not there when you finally began to look in the row of trailers wherein the performers slept.

"Never got his name," you said to the stage manager, a jangling half-paralytic named Shein, when you finally stopped into his trailer to ask. You could only describe him by his make-up which you assumed as a unique identifier amongst clowns like a fingerprint. The other object of interest was his plastic horn. You had earlier stuffed one into your corduroy jacket pocket taken from an enormous bin of them placed on the trailer row's entrance. Product of Taiwan manufactured at a cost of two cents an item. They were meant to be given away en masse by performers to the public. But by and large the performers never mingled with the public. After a given performance, they would all retreat to their trailers and remain there until the next performance. It was just the way circus folk were, according to Shein. They were reclusive to

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the point of being mentally unwell. They were not the sort to rely on for effective public relations.

According to Shein, the only clown he had ever seen go into a bar was that sort who wore the makeup as a sort of last resort prior to institutionalization.

"Some of them are lost," he said to you in the way that made it seem that this was a completely self-evident proposition. "That is," he said, "they have no business being any sort of clown in the first place. Clowning is an altruistic profession in my judgment," he said, "just like a man of the cloth. Some of them have nothing to do and nowhere to go. But to a lunatic, being a clown is something more logical than being let's say an air traffic controller," Shein said. It's the abandoned house at the end of the road that their illness leads them to. It's a type of stand-in for therapy almost that's self-administered. They put the costume on and they're somebody else. I don't know how it works really. But they seem to come out here in droves."

The horn itself, Shein noted, would be of no help at all in determining who it was as this item itself was hardly a specialty of the circus. They bought these by the gross from a warehouse in Chicago. They pasted their own circus decal on them by hand and that was that as far as personalization went.

"The only way I think you can tell one of these fellows from the next," Shein said to you, "is to stare them in the eye and see if there's a hint of recognition there. I don't think there's any affiliation at all there with this circus based on your description of him. He seems in the way too much of an extrovert to be associated with one of ours. In a way, he seems too socially engaged to even be one of our short lists as an understudy."

He went on to say that they couldn't have a full-blown drunk in their midst and not know about it.

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"This is too personal a space here to have a mania like alcoholism nursed and not reveal it to your grease-painted brothers, if only in an indirect way."

On Shein's desk there was a twisted oak pipe that he had been cleaning out just as you walked in.

"We don't allow alcohol anywhere on the premises," he said to you and put the pipe back in the desk drawer from whence it had came just before you walked in. "This is not a haven for the lost and broken despite what it is people might think. Well, maybe a grocery store was opening nearby or something of the sort," he said. "They like drunk clowns because it makes folks happy. It makes folks happy I suspect because they are free to revel at how pathetic the creatures are and how you are not like them."

Well, it all could be so.

But, then again, it was all too much of a coincidence for you. This was a special circus, according to Shein, made up of society's refuseniks. They were proud people generally. They were apostates in the societal church of self-betterment. Not a single goddamn one of them had voted in an election in their entire lives. The clowns in particular were proud of this passivity and would describe the reasons behind it to you at a moment when you signaled that you had time.

They were renunciates, according to Shein, who wouldn't under pain of death admit to a first name. He told you this holding up his hand as if to illustrate the point. Some of them had families in their lives that they had left in the middle of the night without so much as an explanatory letter goodbye.

Neither drunks, nor degenerates of the common stripe, but sullen and mostly anti-social creatures who clowned as a respite from their own internal monologues. They tended constantly toward dark recrimination and moral obfuscation regarding the reality of the Good in an objectively unjust life.

"All of them are my brothers," Shein told you without a trace of defensiveness in his voice and retrieved the pipe from

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his desk. He had long since gotten over the initial nervousness that was generated as an automatic response within all those in your presence initially. He probably had been meaning to light up all along but had stopped himself, reasoning that very soon he would be attempting to pry your meaty fingers from his thin neck and smoking would at best prove a mere distraction and not enjoyable at all.

Indian Head Shein smoked, which had an advertised aroma of a pine forest set ablaze. But to you it reeked of the same ordinary dried vegetation encountered by you while in the shit on your second ToD. The VC had acquired the habit of burning down unfriendly villages and the acrid smoke that was produced as a combination of seared thatch, bamboo, and human fat deposits had proven eerily similar to the tobacco. It acted on your scarred memory as a Proustian madeleine, triggering the dark visions of your post-adolescent grunt experience. Nobody, not even the VA shrinks whose care you still had access to, wanted to hear of such matters. The Vietnam conflict was a verbose page in American history that people were desperate to turn. Or rip from the book entirely. They didn't want to hear of such matters related to what would eventually be known as PTSD. Even within the acclaimed war movies portraying Vietnam veterans, there was documented merely a sense of gloom in the survivor. The operative notion amongst caregivers was that shell-shocked vets should be able to pull themselves together. Nothing had happened over there, after all, that hadn't happened during some other, more successful (from the U.S. perspective) conflict entirely. Omaha Beach, after all, was no picnic. But none of the dogfaces in that battle who had been subjected to the volley and thunder had returned home from Europe addicted to heroin, let's say, and unable to hold a two-minute conversation without breaking down.

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Shein for his part would likely express sympathy for your manias as he himself was afflicted with a PTSD variant known as the jitters.

"The pistol I sleep with under my pillow is likely the same Smith and Wesson brand as yours," he told you about his decades-long struggles trying to calm down. Nothing worked for him except running away to this gray circus and eventually assuming a leadership role. Finding himself at home calmed his jitters to a degree. Presently the gun under the pillow had its safety on. He didn't jump at strange noises so much anymore. And every now and then he was known to look a stranger in the eye.

If you wanted, Shein said, you could make a play to join their gray circus but only if you foreswore alcohol.

"For somebody like you I'd see such abstemious behavior as too much of a burden altogether," Shein told you. "You don't strike me as the abstemious type. In fact, you strike me as the type who would rather drop dead straight off than exist without booze's comfort for so much as a day."

You told Shein that you were about to become a productive member of society. You had not even a hidden desire to join the circus.

"Like the rest of society," you said to him, "clowns give me the creeps big time."

"Have a look around," Shein told you, "and see if anything strikes a nerve. There's nowhere around here you can't go if blessed with the right attitude. Maybe within a few hours you'll be singing a different tune," he said. "I don't know you probably as well as I think I do. You might have hidden complexities for all I know. To me you seem utterly devoid of depth. But for all I know these features might be there like some sort of underwater topography simply waiting to be uncovered."

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The desire you were fighting now was to pluck the pipe from Shein's mouth as he inhaled and dump the lit contents into his lap made asymmetrical by a bout of childhood polio.

"I have this plastic horn," you said to him, "and I have an aim to trade it in for a real brass one."

Your reason for coming out here still dressed in a shirt and tie from your job interview had been entirely forgotten by you. You couldn't even imagine let alone experience the desire to make amends to a stranger because of your rudeness. You couldn't feel what others felt even superficially. If they felt some dark or painful emotion towards another person, it was their duty to either avenge the feeling or deny it utterly. You were not empathetic to others. You assumed they felt the same about you.

Here in the state fairgrounds, a grid system of narrow corridors had been established with an aim to make the herding of livestock easier than would have been the case in an ordinary field.

"It's not my fault, friend. Seldom is," you said to the sword swallower, Majesto, you barely managed to avoid in this corridor that led from Shein's trailer. Having hopped over the three-foot-high fence that bracketed this corridor just in time, you felt you were at liberty to get in the man's face. He had a sword, albeit one shoved into his guts. He was not otherwise imposing. But he had a sword. So you needed room to operate, to bob and weave if it came to that. Hard to say how long it would take for that sword to be put to proper use. But you would be ready if it ever had been.

The fence was not an overwhelming obstacle for most people. But in the dark it almost caused you to trip. Majesto by contrast did not in any way recognize your presence. He had his head tipped backward with eyes focused on the lodestar. This was part of his shtick to prove that he could walk around with the sword inserted. Which apparently was enormously difficult, to judge by his pained expression. For

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some reason, you had been left with the impression that if he had he seen you he would have continued regardless. He had a haughty air about him that derived mostly from his cape and tights costume. He thought he was some type of superhero with it on and free to treat others like garbage.

Vaguely you wondered what would happen if you had chased after Majesto and tried to pull the sword out yourself in harrowing imitation of Arthurian legend. It was only a joke, a subtle post-modernist homage you would say to whoever came to Majesto's aid. You would claim to have been told by one of the circus clowns that sword-swallowing was indeed fake just like a bit of magic. You couldn't imagine how it could be real. You would claim that you had been told that the sword was supposed to be a retractable item found in an ordinary magic shop. You assumed it hadn't gone more than two inches deep at most. You would claim that yanking it out roughly like that and giving it a little twist was all in good fun. You had no idea that it would bring forth blood. You would claim it was a complete shock to you.

Framed in the light of Shein's open trailer door, Majesto seemed momentarily pathetic to you. He was barely five feet three and somebody with a distinct pear-shaped figure. Maybe you would see him on the way back from the big top and he would make things right with you. It was a momentary indiscretion with him, this rudeness. You would introduce yourself to him on the way back and then things would be better between you two. There would be no violence needed to resolve what had just occurred between you two. Minutes later everything would be fine.

It was all more than possible, you thought. But, then again, maybe Majesto was bound for other parts of the circus entirely and you wouldn't see him again. If this was the case, you would need to confront him straight off before the sword was removed and placed back in its sheath or wherever it would ultimately be placed. If only to keep the option on the

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table for you, it needed to be done. As once the sword was removed, it would not be replaced in your presence. All that could be done with the sword once it had been removed from Majesto's innards would be to run him through with it. There was no guile in that act certainly. And from a legal perspective it was indefensible. You couldn't make the argument that sticking a giant knife into a man's guts was any type of simple joke. At that point you might as well have just gone ahead and cut Majesto's head off as a baroque gesture. There would be more wiggle room that way with authorities. You would assert your innocence simply because such an excessive display of violence could occur only as a mistake.

You thought (unconvincingly, to your dark soul) karma would see to Majesto. Or at the very least transport him to you where you could act as karma's stand-in, its bloody right hand.

"We're all like pigs moving to slaughter," you said as you kicked at the retractable fence ending at your knees. Then you began to move down a parallel corridor in an opposite direction. The gaggle of sad-faced clowns Shein spoke to you about held no further allure to you. With such gents, you simply wanted to swap out one type of horn for another. You had wanted to inspect each one from close-up and confirm what Shein had said about them was true. It was mildly interesting to you to witness the sight of sad men going through life completely sober. You would have confronted two or three of them merely and tried to ascertain why this was the case.

Curving outwards from the fairgrounds proper, this pig corridor that you had chosen for yourself briefly paralleled the Eight Mile Road sidewalk. You watched the loitering shapes briefly appearing and vanishing in approaching car lights wondering after their realness. You couldn't ascertain what it was they were doing out here without a certain destination. It didn't appear that they had anything to do with the circus.

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You assumed that they had always been there, maybe for millennia, and always would be up until the sun's extinction.

Hours after leaving the fairgrounds, you would move to the sidewalk where you first saw them and seek out a familiar shape. Nobody was there in the pedestrian walk. You would walk around for a while back and forth and wonder after the accuracy of your vision. Eventually you would return to the bus stop from whence you came and return to your brother's apartment. The smell of the dead Lippitzer stallion that you had helped the stable boy to undress and butcher for dog food was still on you now. The plastic horn was at this moment disappeared.

You didn't understand the motive behind anything just then. You didn't understand if you were real in fact or just one of those headlight-produced shadows that had fascinated you so much past the point that you lost the desire to hurt anyone.

II.

The machine they put you in front of a week later was a hole boring unit specified for sheet metal vintage of World War II.

"You turn the knob and watch the sparks fly," the floor supervisor Hayes said to you showing you the yellow tape on the floor forming a box where you were obliged to stand throughout the day. You were entitled to a ten-minute break every two hours and a one-hour lunch running exactly from noon to one. You didn't have to eat lunch during that time, according to Hayes, but you sure as shit needed to be back at the hole borer by one. The first thing Hayes told you was that work resumed exactly at the top of the hour.

"See up there," he said to you pointed at the one-way glass on the shop's second floor that opened to the office. Never knew who's watching you from that vantage point but

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somebody usually was. I mean, you'd have to be out of your fucking mind to not be back at work by five-to minimally. Some motherfuckers are risk-taskers and wait till the exact minute. But if their assigned presses don't start up immediately, they're fucked. Work means work, Hayes told you. *Pro-duct-ivity*. Performing basic maintenance tasks on your machine was a lunchtime activity solely, according to him. It didn't matter what your union or the Michigan Department of Labor had to say. In here, it's for the lunch hour strictly. So, if you're uncertain about how the drill bit was to be swapped out, your best bet was not to take lunch at all in the noon hour. You could use the time for research and practice.

The rules were the rules were the rules were the rules were the gosh darn rules, according to Hayes. And nobody ever accused this shop of turning a blind eye to matters concerning workforce policy.

"The first four weeks are the worst generally," Hayes told you quickly, darting his eyes back up to the office window to see if anybody was watching. Latest rumor was that management had hired a lip reader once the union had put its foot down on the using of hidden microphones in the lunch room. Well, Hayes didn't know since his contact in the upper office had disappeared, but curse words generally should be spoken with one's hand placed over one's mouth or not at all. After the first four weeks, he told you, such evasions became second nature to a typical worker.

You tended to sleepwalk through a day, at least on the good days. Your only real responsibility was to set the boring machine's specifications properly and inspect the hole that had been created afterward for imperfections owing to a dull or distorted drill bit. If such an imperfection was spotted, your job was to transport the thirty-pound sheet to the reject pile for melting down. The metal had sharp edges and you were assigned a pair of cloth gloves during your orientation

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that you were directed to wear while transporting the sheet. Also, during orientation, you were pointed to the first aid area on the shop floor that you were directed to move to in the event of an injury. The area contained a two-foot by three-foot wooden cabinet filled with bandages and gauzes and a bottle of mercurochrome that a worker had donated. The only other medical supply was a speculum of military origin. This device had gone unused throughout the shop's forty-year history. Very few people even knew which orifice it was designed for.

The shop's owner, the man who put all these procedures into effect and had interviewed you for the job last week, was a chain-smoking evangelical named Sass.

"He's there. Keep your eyes focused at all times on the press like it's the most beautiful woman you've ever seen in your life," Hayes said to you at a moment, sensing somehow a presence in the glass overhead. In fact, he had a hand mirror that he kept referring to constantly to see what was going on behind him. It was Hayes' last bit of advice to you on this your first day: that you should walk over to the nearby Woolworth's and procure a hand mirror for yourself. You looked around at how many of the shop workers on the floor had them. It was an indispensable item, according to Hayes. Keep one in your locker he said and one in your front pocket. According to him, the front office still hadn't been aware about what was up with them.

Try as you might to hate this institution like all the others, two months into your stay you found yourself genuinely enjoying the opportunity to serve the borer.

"No need to be so chipper, he's done away with a probation period," Hayes told you when encountering you once on a cigarette break. He was referring to Mr. Sass. This concession might have been a gift to the union to head off a strike. But likely it was due to Sass' arbitrary reading of the Bible and the notion that probationary periods might be

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considered un-Christian. Hayes didn't know what bit of scripture said this, but he assumed scripture was the reason. Sass was constantly reviewing the Bible's pages, looking for inspiration about how to live. He had the Good Book open on his desk nowadays more than the mysterious spreadsheets containing business data around which this shop revolved. He didn't seem to be motivated by making a profit as maintaining obeisance to the Lord above. Which to Hayes raised the question why he hadn't sold the business. Maybe he was in the process of selling and the employees would be the last to know. But keeping it a secret didn't seem an especially Christian act. He was an obvious religious hypocrite, but he still met payroll. So, in this recessionary economy nobody was complaining unduly.

You found it amusing that others believed you were sucking up to the boss. As you told Hayes, you didn't think you were psychologically capable of sucking up to anyone.

"Man, I've been in trouble all my life," you told him. "I don't think I would know how to kiss somebody's ass for real," you said. "The ass I've kissed in life I did so only so I could be close enough to hurt somebody later. I've never thought of myself as somebody with a hidden agenda," you told Hayes. "I don't think I would know how to sneak around if I thought it was a good thing to do."

Not being a braggart to any degree, you had started to grow weary of your own intransigence in the face of common sense. You just felt the notion of others considering you as some kind of toady meant that they were ignorant of your true intentions. You very well had the ability to be as sullen and resentful of authority as all the others on the shop floor. You had proven this constantly, at least to yourself. Over the course of months, you assumed people would get to know you better than that. This Sass to you sounded like a supreme asshole. If he messed with you in any way, you would give as well as get. It didn't matter if he decided to fire you

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afterwards, you would give as well as get. You had been on the lam before, been homeless before briefly, and existed more or less as one of society's dregs. You didn't care what sort of opprobrium Sass would hurl at you for sticking up for yourself. You felt you owed it to yourself to be your own man. You didn't care if others conceived of you as a loose cannon and made your life hell because of it.

You liked the machines around here because the amount of attention you were required to pay to them dictated that generally you didn't have to interact with others. You were deeply misanthropic and felt it a kind of moral duty to foster misanthropy in others. Another person was fucking crazy if they thought any other human being on this planet had anything in store for them more than using them as a stepping stone for bouts of further advancement absent of the love and support they promised to you. You liked the machines because they promised nothing to you. And were as unsentimental as the insects that you used to play with in your mother's garden as a boy, giving them storybook names like other boys would to stuffed animals and watching their exertions for hours all the way past sunset.

One day you were measuring a hole with the pen-size gauge Hayes gave you when Mr. Sass appeared behind you with his arms folded behind his back like a speed skater executing a turn.

"Don't think we've had the chance to talk," he said to you. "In all the time we've been here, I don't think we've engaged in any sort of one-on-one."

Over Sass' shoulder was the electric giant clock to whose regimented progress all the shop's machinists had conformed.

"Smith," he said to you before you could give him your real name. He was trying to control his hands as they lifted off from his side like so many disturbed chickadees. "Your name's Smith, I assume."

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You looked at the second hand of the clock intently and tried to see whether it had, as many other workers had accused it of doing, stopped and waited past the number nine thus extending the day illegally.

You told Mr. Sass that if he wanted to call you Smith that would be fine. You didn't feel the desire to correct him. It didn't matter what Sass called you, you told him. As chances were, he would forget the real name a minute after it was given, and he would start to call you Smith all over again. Sass was that type who insisted on his own humanity even as he was in the process of denying yours. You could spot such an inadvertent bully from a hundred yards away. You didn't condemn him for it straight off. But conversations of all stripes of late had started to lose their appeal for you. You simply wished Sass would get to the fucking point and let the bullying commence in earnest.

Maybe the sticky second hand on the clock was all Sass' doing. And there was some measure of connectedness to it and what was taking place now.

"Smith," Mr. Sass said, "I have been afflicted with strange visions lately. Ever since your arrival in the immediate area, I have been finding it increasingly difficult to gain a night's sleep and concentrate on my work in the morning."

Nobody on the floor was looking at them. To you this signaled that here was a familiar scene, with Mr. Sass accusing one of his employees in a roundabout way of possessing diabolical intentions towards him. Prior to him being let go.

The large wooden crucifix around Mr. Sass's neck was handmade by him from a mangled Galilean oak.

"You need to look into my eyes," Mr. Sass said to you, "and announce to me and all those who will bear witness of your intentions towards me. You need to get down on your knees in front of me and recite the Lord's Prayer five times perfectly in rapid succession. This is a test derived from the tenth century that can help distinguish a demon from a man,"

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he told you. "This is not my doing hardly in any way. I am not the man who set you upon the path," he said. Merely I am a fierce believer, haunted by terrible dreams. I go to the bathroom at four in the morning and curl up in the tub. And when my eyes open, perhaps it is many days later, I am covered with a sticky milky fluid like a newborn. I bathe in the fluid, Smith," he told you. "And then I spend the rest of the day in prayer begging for enlightenment."

The Lord heard not Mr. Sass' desperate entreaties for enlightenment. Which, according to Mr. Sass, only drove him to further acts of self-abnegation. He believed you a demon spawned by the same demon who was torturing him. Presently Mr. Sass wanted you to prove that this was not the case. He had specific notions involving ritual prayer to enable this denial. He thought even now you should be driven to your knees to pray. But present OSHA rules argued against kneeling on a workplace floor devoid of protective knee pads. There was also a problem of a worker placing his head at the level of others' swinging arms. There was a problem with the floor itself being unhygienic. And there was the problem of sexual harassment that the act seemed to suggest.

Sass, who had no desire to be hauled in to yet another OSHA hearing, stated the problem as succinctly as he might.

"If you want," you told him, "we can head upstairs to your office. You can shut the door behind you. And then I'll do anything you want to prove my loyalty to you."

At this suggestion, Sass' blue eyes widened behind the thick safety goggles that were standard protection out here.

"This is a trick. Of course it is, Smith," Mr. Sass told you addressing you on the top of the stairs that he had flown to once you had suggested the meeting. "But I have a Bible that protects me from all manner of legerdemain. You can play with the pages all you want and we will see what happens," he said to you. Eventually you will recite the prayer or leave at once. I have no intention to wake in the middle of the night

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any longer laboring under a satanic spell. Yea, but you can tempt me alone. There is a Bible quote I have that proves my impervious nature. And like Job, eventually I will be rewarded for my patience. Eventually you will be banished to the hell from which you came."

The anteroom adjacent to Mr. Sass' office contained the window opening on the shop floor and various specimens of sheet metal that were judged to be perfectly bored and thus could be given to prospective clients as evidence of this firm's exquisite rendering.

"Wait just a moment," you said to him and picked up a sample and shoved it against the closed anteroom door to forestall the intercession of one of the owner's clip-on tie wearing lackeys you had seen strolling the halls every now and again, staring daggers at the employees in the lunchroom when the fifty-eighth break minute had come and gone and several of them were still lingering at a table.

Once in the office you made a fist and threw a punch in the general direction of the Sass's jaw. After the punch landed, Mr. Sass made a face and went down on his knees as if receiving heavenly direction to do so from the Lord of the World, a certain Mr. Jesus Christ.

"In a way, you are right about certain things," you said to Sass thumbing through the Bible he had given you only minutes before. "One of these is that I am a demon in human form. But this hell that I am from surrounds us all," you told him. "It permeates us. You have everything to do with me as I have everything to do with you. But when I look at you, somehow, I see nothing of myself. To me, you are a completely distinct species. Your affliction is none of my affair except for the fact that you have made it to so. Now I am reliant on your mercy for my survival. But it is by my nature that I turn away from my own self-interests toward destructive behavior. This too is your fault. You have made me and directed my actions against you. There is nothing that

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I can do to you that you haven't already done to me. And in so many horrible ways that I can't find the courage to name them all just now."

Sass' face had gone taught of late as you spoke as if he was receiving broadcasts from a different plane of being entirely.

"I think I rattled something loose in there when I hit him," two hours later you said to Hayes of your encounter with the boss. You had found Hayes at the bar workers frequented after hours.

Such rattling you pointed out was maybe for the better, maybe for the worse. The ferocity had seemed to have left Sass's eyes as a result of the blow struck. He was neither compliant nor receptive to that which you were trying to communicate to him. All the brimstone and fire of his accusations against you had been left behind with his equilibrium. He was likely still as crazy before as after. But he was somehow better socialized. Which led you to believe somebody should have punched him in the face frequently. He was a bad person in your judgment underneath all the lunacy. You didn't feel sorry for him, therefore. About all that was done to him and all that you had done to him, you were unapologetic. You thought people should have known better. You thought people should take a good look at you and fear you after a fashion.

Once you were reasonably sure Sass wasn't about to pass out, you had started tearing pages out of the Bible and feeding it to him in individual dumpling size portions. You weren't selective in your choice of the passages you fed him, choosing from Genesis and Revelations in equal amounts. You weren't rendering any sort of extended criticism of the Good Book's eschatology here. You felt the need to be cruel merely and were going about it in as efficient a way as possible. The pages at the beginning and the end of the thick tome were easier to tear out. You needed to separate them from each

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other to crumple them up into bite-size nougats. You felt the need to work quickly as you might even though the sheet metal was in place.

Ten pages in, maybe just after Noah received direction from God to build his arc, Mr. Sass began to vomit the pages back up. Which led you to question his fealty to the Word.

"I was just joking around here," you told Hayes. "Just fucking with him in my usual high-spirited way."

In reality, you had no real mature theological outlook to share. Merely you were being cruel at Sass's expense, as you felt minutes before he had been cruel at your expense. Probably something was tainted in those pages, the ink or the gold leaf contained some toxin that made upchucking inevitable, regardless of the level of spiritual commitment of the digester. Sass hadn't assumed that and was understandably embarrassed about the vomiting and in his confused state had tried to apologize to you. You in your clear-minded way suggested he enact a form of penance by scooping up the whitish biblical puke and trying all over again. The second time down it might well have been able to remain that way though this proved not to be the case somehow. Eventually you grew tired of the whole spectacle and split. You felt you had made your point with him well enough. You felt you were on level terms with Mr. Sass finally after so much abuse that he had hurled at you for no reason.

Of course, the cops were after you now because of this bit of impromptu deviltry. Just before he had sat down next to you, Hayes confirmed that this was so, stating that for the past few hours cops had been in and out of the shop floor trying to spot your whereabouts.

"It's the toady I was telling you about, Smith, who found the boss with puke all over him and a bruise on his jaw, Hayes said to you confirming a scene you had been imagining sometimes nervously, sometimes wistfully ever since

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relocating to the bar. "For the last half hour, they were grilling us, trying to get a bead on where you were," Hayes said. "Nobody said shit to them. But I don't think that's going to last long. Eventually they're going to look in here on a tip," he said. "Which means if I was you, I'd think about making this the last Wild Turkey of the day. Maybe you think you've done nothing wrong but that's not the considered opinion amongst the law enforcement community. Supposedly there's some outstanding warrant they discovered when they pulled your file. And Sass, believe it or not, has friends in high places. He's viewed as a great humanitarian in some circles because of his work in building churches in Africa. A pillar of society he's viewed as though his recent actions tell a different story altogether. The cops love him because he donates to their fund. And even they were alarmed really at the state you left the old bastard in."

You had not known of Sass's status prior to your attacking him, but to your considerable credit (this was the way you now saw it) it wouldn't have mattered if you had.

"Everybody knows what sort of person he is," you told Hayes and smiled as he offered to buy you a drink. Look, that was true enough. But times were tough in this city and nobody was about to walk off their job simply because their employer had several screws loose. Sixteen percent unemployment rate in Michigan, according to today's headline in the *Detroit Free Press* and that likely might have been only half the story. The Japanese were in the midst of taking over the auto industry entirely. Hard to say if anybody in this town would have a job within five years. An old-line machinist's shop that offered a pension was as rare as hen's teeth nowadays. They all seemed like the last of a breed on the floor, barely hanging on. They all felt themselves as supremely vulnerable regardless of what the actual truth might be.

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According to Hayes, even this shop and its meager wages and brutal work rules was swimming against an economic tide that would prove inexorable over the course of years.

"He has investors all the while that tell him to come and relocate," Hayes said to you of Sass, the man you had assaulted several hours before. "They want him down in Mexico, down in Guadalajara where there's a work force that'll do this work piecemeal at a halfpenny a hole. They don't give a shit about the gringos. They live like dogs down there and don't care that they do. They're willing to put up with anything, live ten to a room for years as the alternative is worse. That's the way the world works nowadays, as a race into the gutter. You have no choice in the matter but to guard what little you have. I'm not lying when I say to you it gets worse than what you've seen down on our floor. Sass's a raving lunatic, crazy as it comes. But I'm not lying when I tell you it gets worse than this quickly. Before you can do anything about it, you're fucked. And then you're like one of them. And you might as well be an animal on a farm rolling in your own shit for the pleasure of others."

*Was Jesus born of a Virgin pure
With narrow soul and looks demure?
If He intended to take on sin
The Mother should an harlot been,
Just such a one as Magdalen,
With seven devils in her pen.*

Maybe Sass did know Christ from a schizophrenic figment, after all. You thought this, strolling down Woodward Avenue to your brother Bob's overstuffed apartment. At least he was concerned about the souls of others more so than the corporate downsizers who (to hear Hayes tell it) were his lone advisors nowadays.

"He was bat shit crazy years before I met him," you said of Mr. Sass to Theotormon, your spiritual kinsman who would

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appear usually after drink number seven and hug the walls of whatever establishment you were drinking in until you were alone.

Theotormon was devoid of either eyes or ears or a mouth to emit protests from. Or a nose to inhale his self-made effluence and at least confirm he was a living thing like other living things, fulsome with Adam's sin though he was.

"Not ordinarily crazy," you said to Theotormon of Sass, "but of a special level of crazy all his own. And somewhere between a rabid squirrel and a garden variety false prophet. Something like that," you said and pointed in the middle of the street at an empty traffic island. You were drunk and growing ever more expansive with each step. Unlike your interlocutor, Theotormon, you were a sensuous creature capable of much interacting with the world. You didn't look inward for stimulation hardly ever anymore. Staring into your soul nowadays you beheld only an abyss. And you knew what that looked like already.

He was a good man based on his own principles, Sass. But it was his principles that were perverted. So, all the goodness dissipated up into the ether immediately like soot up a chimney stack.

"If I had to do it all over again, I simply wouldn't have shown up," you told Theotormon who was barely paying attention to you. Not a freak or a cripple in the usual sense of the term, he was of course a mythological construct briefly given life by your own pickled (and quite likely traumatized) mind. You didn't see him as deformed but as merely an otherworldly creature whose comprehension of his surroundings was utterly provisional and likely indecipherable to an ordinary human mind.

He had a way regardless of letting you know he was paying attention to you. Strolling past the used bookstores of Royal Oak, Theotormon would regard his own image in the glass of the unadorned storefronts. Blind as he was, it wasn't

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his own image that held his attention but merely the mental concept of his image which did not correspond to any actual allusion of flesh. Hard to say how he made the jump from perception to thought absent the sensate world, though the fact that he was likely imaginary aided him greatly in this cause. You were viewing him as he was viewing himself. And likely you were unreal as he was and conceived of such matters unhindered by the doubts and interruptions of the perceptions of ordinary folk when conceiving of such matters filtered through a skein of alcohol.

A taxidermist shop at Eleven and a half and Woodward beckoned. This was opened in-season only owing to the paucity of trade after the latest round of auto layoffs in the area.

"The first thing the victims get rid of is their vacations," Hernandez, the shop's proprietor, told you when, in want of anything better to do, you stopped to admire his handiwork. Clay models lined the workspace's floor. This was as opposed to the chicken wire and wood you had trained on years ago at the college in Thunder Bay.

These clay figures were intentionally generic, only roughly suggestive of the real animals whose exteriors they would eventually don like so many magic life-giving cloaks in a Grimm's fairytale. Viewed in this naked manner, they hardly seemed up to the task for which they were manufactured. They were as artificial looking as bits of aluminum siding and seemingly as impersonally manufactured. Nevertheless, this was the only type of skeleton that Hernandez used.

He said that the autoworkers, once they were devoid of vacation, didn't flock up north to hunt at all as was their traditional habit.

"They hang around the local places and get hammered instead," Hernandez said. "Or maybe some of them go up but they use their kill as meat. It's a trophy, it's a positive thing, a

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buck's head," he told you. "I just don't think they're in the fucking mood to reclaim one for themselves," he said, surmising for you the taxidermist's subtle art in a sentence. "They got problems of their own to deal with," he told you. "They're not in a celebratory mood even when they're out on a drunken lark."

To Hernandez, you wondered how much one of these clay models would cost absent a hide that would lend to it a fiction of once being alive.

"On the house," he said to you and handed you a ten-inch-high figure that was meant to model a Wiltshire lamb. Yes, a Wiltshire lamb. Such creatures froze to death routinely while in the shepherd's care. Thus, a *momento mori* of them needed to be constructed. Once completed, these would be mounted by the hooves to a wooden plaque and placed in shepherd's living rooms. The guilt over the death, therefore, would be removed somewhat from the shepherd's life. The cool clay underneath would be hidden from view. They would look at the little lamb and imagine it vocalizing. They didn't see what you and Mr. Hernandez saw. They weren't heavy into the techniques of taxidermy like you and he were.

The creature weighed less than four pounds. Its lightness allowed you to grip it in one of your overlarge hands and hold it completely parallel to the pavement just like others would hold a navel orange. Except when the moment arrived to move out of another person's way or duck into a nearby alley, you weren't even aware of its presence. You had a notion of what should be done with the creature. Which was to display it unadorned of a hide. You would stare into its empty face just as you had stared into Theotormon's. In both, you would search in vain for evidence of organ differentiation. The attraction of these faces for you was held in their lifeless plainness. You could never see the appeal of an expressive countenance. What was compelling to you was in the simple

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clay. It was so unadorned it did not even suggest life so much as imitation of a corpse.

Nobody saw weirdness in what you were carrying around. They saw your size and detected your potential for violence in your unkempt hair and the way you tended to pick out a straight line and follow that line with protruding elbows independent of who or what they might intersect with. If they noticed the clay lamb at all, it might have been without interest assuming it to be some sort of overlarge unpainted Christmas decoration bound for a municipal crèche. It wasn't any of their motherfucking business. They had no intention of drilling down into it.

You seemed a deeply private person to them in the way you repelled queries from others. Before taking the damn thing up you assumed that nobody would give you any shit about it. The cops of course would give you shit about it eventually. But first you would have to be handcuffed and bound to the bolted down metallic chair that they used for the temporary detainment of violent suspects. They would ask you about it and you would answer them calmly saying this is my lamb and my lord and savior. Then you would recite for them your favorite Blake song:

*He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name*

At the corner of Woodward Avenue and Catalpa there was an auto dealership advertising the spectacle of destroying a Honda Civic with sledgehammers in exchange for a five-dollar entrance fee.

"Sushi special!" somebody screamed and aimed his hammer at the driver's side mirror. Its blunt edge impacted with the Civic's door instead and dropped straight down onto the screamer's sneakered right foot, breaking it.

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The screamer fell, then rose. He was lit apparently, and the pain was temporarily minimal. Other Toyota bashers foreswore the wearing of goggles and had bits of glass in their eyelids. Routinely participants were falling down on the pavement around the Honda and kicking at it with their boot heels scraping at the tires with bleeding fingers formed into the shape of claws by brains too poorly functioning to realize their frailty in advance. Trying to have a good time as they might, they were colliding up against the materials and engineering of a sophisticated modern product. They were finding their soft bodies to not be up to the task even with a mechanical aid. They were damaging the car but not to the degree they imagined that they should. The glass by this point was all blown out. But their arms had grown weary, inexperienced as they were with the hammer. And they didn't have a real game plan.

Seeing you there with the clay lamb staring at him, the man with the broken foot was put in mind of somebody in need of a serious ass whipping.

"Lookit, this fucking faggot and his dolly," he said to you, but didn't even try and rise. "If I were fucking you," he said, "I'd walk over to the other side of the street. If I was you, I wouldn't go looking me in the eye."

Rather than look him in the eye you spat in his face and kicked him in the head. Then you moved on. Nobody followed you. The auto dealer, the man with the gag glasses on that made his eyes look Asian threatened you with a baseball bat as you did so. But he did not raise it against you and took a large step back toward the show room when you turned briefly and held the lamb up towards him.

"He is meek and he is mild," you said to him and walked on. You were fucked you assumed well in advance of meeting any of them. You didn't feel the need to enact an eye for an eye with them. You were full as it were of the Lord's love-giving rays from the day's events. Besides, the cops were here

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already stalking you from a distance. You began to run trying to make it home to Bob's. At the very least you were trying to save the clay lamb from future harm.

They could not hurt the lamb as they could you. You were ten steps from the front door once they caught up to you and put a choke hold on you. A large dog was looking out from the second floor watching the festivities. And he had his eye on the lamb's neck with constancy. That was his nature merely. He could do nothing about it. He wouldn't have even thought to try.

1986: Proverbs of Hell

I.

They threw you into prison for five years and ordered you into therapy with a psychiatrist. This particular government shrink was more concerned about the deleterious state of her investment portfolio than your tattered soul. At the start of every session, the psychiatrist would have your file out on her desk to be able to recall your name correctly from her notes. She was just like all the rest of the authority figures in your life. She saw you as something disposable merely, to be used and ignored.

She had as much compassion for you as she did for the plastic office chair on which she presently sat, attempting to make it recline out of boredom.

"Think of a color, my dear," this shrink, a squat Austrian transplant with the surname Krutz, said to you when you were sprawled out on the ripped office couch with one forearm over your eyes. "Anything that makes you happy or sad," she said. "Anything you think is important or comes to your mind just because."

The financial statement presently out on her desk was giving her far more pause than your flat affect. She didn't seem to believe you were in psychological pain. She didn't

seem to think that beneath your skull there was anything more than rolls of damp skin.

There were specific stocks in Dr. Krutz' fund whose recent weak performance she was deeply upset over. That is, she was upset about having owned them in the first place. She didn't understand her financial advisor's plan to recoup the losses suffered from the latest market downturn resultant from the latest recession.

She was trying her best to ascertain the quickest way to be rid of them, minimizing her loss. She was trying her best to figure out how a brilliant woman like herself could seemingly err in her financial judgment, specifically choosing this advisor in the first place.

The color you thought of was brilliant red. Which was the color of blood only in monster movies and childish dreams of pain and death.

"Blue," you said to Dr. Krutz when answering her question about what color. You were being civilly disobedient with her, believing the therapy was a punishment which required you to resist. You were always answering her in what you felt was a contrary way to your true sentiments. Building a wall as it were around your psyche. Not that she noticed or would ever attempt to breach the fortification if she had.

Staring deeply at a pie chart on page 2, Dr. Krutz told you to conjure a memory based on this color. She told you to think of a time when this shade of blue was appropriate and had infiltrated like a gelatinous ooze in between the cracks of the sense data that all memories possess.

"Anything about it," she said to you saying your name with a question on the end like it was one of her troubled assets. "We are not here to create a scrapbook," she said. "Anything you have to say should be said now," she told you. "You don't have to hold back even slightly. You shouldn't

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hold back even though the feeling is telling you that you should."

In fact, the brilliant red color had been triggered by a memory of war. This was the witnessing of a rape of a five-year-old villager by a member of your platoon.

"When I was a kid," you said to her instead, "there was a movie theater on the corner that every so often would drape its marquee in sky blue bunting. This would signal the coming of a special event in the theater," you said. "This would usually mean that a celebrity of some sort was about to arrive in our little corner of it for a local premier. And that we would be invited to see him or her."

Bleeding in through the plaster walls of Dr. Krutz' office came the staccato tintinnabulation of a prisoner in the adjacent cell engaged in a bout of dry heaving. Something was wrong with the prisoner inside that triggered so much heaving in such a continuous way. None of the medical staff, however, saw his condition as any concern of theirs. Especially in Dr. Krutz' office, the retching noise had been dimmed to a point that it was a comfort to all who perceived its uneven passage. It was the prison equivalent of a ticking clock. It made them each aware that somewhere all was as it should be. If not here precisely, then somewhere else.

The celebrity that you had in mind for your fake memory was Lana Turner. She of the processed blonde locks and emotionless countenance seemed to you a star to above all others whose memory was deserving of being defiled and in a very forward way.

"Lana was better looking in public than on the screen," you told Dr. Krutz who, unbeknownst to you, had her attentions directed elsewhere. "Yes, Lana Turner. She came to the movie theater when I was six-years-old and knelt down to look me in the eye. She stared at me and I stared at her. And then she said to me something truly profound that I somehow cannot recall."

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The realization began to dawn in Dr. Krutz by slow degrees that she had been swindled by her financial advisor! Swindled! He was not merely a bad money manager but a true crook! Blood called out for blood in this instance. She thought it was obvious now that the objective evidence was in front of her. The financial advisor was of Armenian extraction and had been less than forthright with her up front apparently. Presently she was trying to think of a way of reclaiming some of her lost income. She might try and file a complaint against him with the SEC. She might also locate his residence and attempt some bit of measured justice against his property while he was away using one of her patients as her instrument.

In your fake imaginary experience, Lana Turner appeared to you as a goddess of the silver screen dressed in a skirt cut just above the knee in the same vision of blue as the theater marquee above.

"For you it was a good experience," Dr. Krutz told you if only to confirm for yourself that she was still paying attention. "This Lana Turner I am assuming was a family friend of your mothers. You knew her from childhood. And it was a shock to you to realize you were suddenly so sexually attracted to her."

In fact, Lana Turner never floated your boat in the same way that Ava Gardner had. You were about to correct Dr. Krutz when you suddenly recalled that you were in the midst of passively resisting the therapy.

"Anything you say to me I take as gospel straight off," you said to her and asked to be allowed to smoke a cigarette. Oh yes, here was a part of the therapy that you were undergoing. It was a series of rewards and punishments being meted out. If you simply took one from off her desk for example that would mean you would be deprived of cigarettes for the next two weeks. They had a chart for all this that they had handed you on the first day of prison

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orientation. Here they were trying to perfect the penological experience. The presiding warden here, Dr. Jefferson, thought he had found the key to human happiness. There would be no derivations allowed in this regimen whatsoever.

If this Levantine financial advisor of Dr. Krutz had a weakness, she thought, it would be in her best interests to exploit it prior to the next statement arriving.

"I'm surrounded by dogs, by howling wolves devoid of pity or even the common instinct for decency. Which is not the same as real decency," she said basically to herself then struggled to recall at what stage they were in your therapy. Or why the therapy was warranted.

Narcissist with psychopathic tendencies had been the words Dr. Krutz had written on the line marked *Personality Profile* on your six-page MIPL-125. In the comments section of the form, she had scribbled her prognosis for you. Which was that your affliction was incurable. She said that, furthermore, your illness could only be managed to the degree that you became less an imminent threat to others and more an imminent threat to yourself. The goal of treatment was to get you to bend your rage inward up to the point of suicide. A doctor was not bound by the Hippocratic Oath in your case. There was such a thing as self-defense for the whole of society.

She thought eventually she could use you for her own ends before that point arrived. A megalomaniac herself, Krutz wanted to exact revenge upon her financial advisor. His name was Joe Martikian and he had just entered a world of pain. Dr. Krutz had gotten into the psychiatric field simply because she tracked so closely to the lunatics under her care. She was likely *non compos mentis* herself. But she had a M.D. and a staff badge that allowed her to come and go from the facilities whenever she pleased. So, fuck off.

"Have you ever had a negative experience with a money manager who possessed eyebrows like push brooms," she said to you just after the sounding of the buzzer prison-wide

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that let it be known that whatever activity had been on-going during this fifty-minute block was at an end. The next fifty-minute block would have you in a prison commissary wiping off tables in preparation for dinner. You would be given from zero to three merit points based on the job you did wiping. A hundred merit points would buy you access to the air hockey table in the prison game room for a week. Two hundred merit points and a note would be placed in your file identifying you as having exhibited good behavior all throughout your incarceration.

If you mouthed off to a prison guard for any reason, there was a twenty-demerit penalty that would be noted in brilliant red ink on the right-hand side of the weekly report you were handed and forced to sign in front of a correctional officer duly appointed for the task.

For violent acts towards inmates or prison guards, there were no demerits at all oddly as these were considered state penal code violations and were subject to the auspices of the law as opposed to the behavior modification system created by this experimental joint's warden, Dr. Jack Jefferson. In all your time spent here amongst occasionally violent criminals, you had witnessed exactly two knock-out drag outs occurring in the general population. In both instances, the participants were never heard from again. They were supposedly transferred to a medium security facility in Midland. Couldn't keep their shit together, these yobs. And so they got what they deserved. You couldn't get a real drink inside here was the worst part of your prison experience. But you were determined to endure, nevertheless.

Everything here was so monitored and controlled you hadn't yet felt the desire to lash out. You hated it here. But all throughout your journey into this space you were mysteriously controlled, nonetheless. Probably this meant to a limited extent Dr. Jefferson's program worked. And for this alone he needed to be commended.

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Two work periods after your therapy session, you were in the prison theater taking part in an on-going twenty-four-hour production of Peter Weiss' *Marat Sade*. This, too, was designed as a type of therapy for unlettered inmates. Dr. Jefferson believed the notion of a fixed persona caused men to commit the acts of violence that they had.

During this period, you had been assigned the role of *Madam Marat*. Your task was to sit normally in one of the theater seats and have a conversation with *Patient Number Two*. There was no audience for this production, no reason beyond therapy as to why it was being staged. One was always a mere performer when one entered the theater's confines. One had been obliged to see one's life outside the theater as an improvised role as well.

The whole point was to get you to see that nothing in between your ears was real. There were certain truths exterior to your consciousness, but these were forever hidden to you. The goal was ego destruction. Or at least a realization that one was not the center of all things.

"In Buffalo, New York, I have a cousin with a bad temper," Inmate Number Two told you, after the inmate playing the inmate Sade flounced by in a fright wig and lace, "who has work for us both. Something with the mob," he told you, "something involving the high-jacking of cargo trucks. He's unenlightened but he gets things done. He only takes ex-cons as he says these are the only ones he can trust."

Four hundred clams a truck, he told you depending on the richness of the cargo. He told you that somebody like you was perfect for the assignment. He told you that a certain aura was omnipresent about you that seemed to suggest hidden capabilities for larceny.

"I described you to him in detail in one of the long letters the German shrink made me write," Inmate Number Two said. "I went on and on about you and your cold dead eyes. I told him that the buck stops here with one such as you. I

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described your many violent crimes as you have described them for me. And I communicated your timetable for parole. Which, according to the chart Dr. Jefferson publishes every other month, is less than eight weeks away."

Indeed, you had the date noted. Devoid of prospects as you were once on the outside, you were grateful for the contact. A condition for your parole stipulated a six-month residency minimum in the state wherein your crime was committed (Michigan). But you were convinced that there were loopholes. You thought, for example, you could present yourself as a charity case desperately in need of work. You also thought you could simply blow town and let the chips fall where they may.

Up until this point in your life nobody had taken an excessive interest in your whereabouts. You assumed it would continue this way forever. Maybe your look-alike brother Bob could be employed to check in for you. You doubted very much any parole officer would be so scrupulous as to re-fingerprint a man for each visit made. Or maybe they would, but that would be the end of it. Bob could claim he was threatened into it by you. And you would be long gone by then and unavailable to answer questions.

You thought four hundred a truck was chump change considering the danger that you realized was involved in their hijacking.

"You put a gun to the driver's head at a rest stop and tell him to scram," you said to Number Two describing the easiest viable way for something like that to go down. The only other way would be to flag the semi down in the middle of a highway or construct a roadblock and compel them to stop with a rifle pointed at their heads. Sometimes they would stop and sometimes they would panic and attempt to bust right through the roadblock. You had seen it many times before in your mind's eye, rehearsing the scene. In this fantasy, you were some sort of genius of crime looking for

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your opportunity to put theory into practice. But you were right about this point. You thought whoever it was running the show in the Buffalo syndicate was driving a hard bargain past the point of being reasonable.

Maybe there would be lucre to skim off the surface once the truck was secure. That was why the rate was so low originally.

"According to him, that doesn't happen," Inmate Number Two told you once the play's progress up the small theater's single aisle had passed. Marat in this last incarnation was having a hard time dying. No, he didn't want to die or at least the character who was bound to play him didn't. An inmate playing a mental patient playing Charlotte Courdray had chased him out of the tub with an eight-inch knife leading the way. This was the type of improvisation that Dr. Jefferson encouraged. It drilled down he felt to the false notions of character that were at the root of so many of the inmates' criminal tendencies. It made them confront their at-root emptiness that they kept on rebelling against when trying to live free.

These dumb fucks were always trying to be true to "themselves" in a ham-fisted way. Dr. Jefferson thought they needed to be schooled in the provisional nature of ego. The realness of their nothingness needed to be demonstrated for them. They needed to be taught that if they looked deep inside themselves with any acuity, they would perceive nothing other than a bottomless pit over which translucent sheets of personality had been stretched. The truth lay behind the sheets, not within them. And once this epiphany was reached, the need to commit crimes would fade away as completely as a dull dream's memory seconds after the dreamer awoke.

Capos, which were mob bosses of a lesser rank, would be there to greet the hijackers at an agreed upon destination exactly thirty minutes after the deal went down.

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"If they even think you have stolen anything from the trucks, they line you up against the wall of the garage they're using as a weigh station and put a bullet in your head," Inmate Number Two told you. "Just like that," he said. I mean they don't even ask questions. They don't think of what they done after it's done. It's the way they are. It don't matter to them who lives or dies as long as they're the one that's alive. Men of their word, I'd say. A guy like you as long as you learn to take only what they're offering could get along fine with them. I don't believe you're dumb or nothing like that like. Not like all the other guys say. A man like you can make something of himself as long as he's able to control himself. Which I think you are. You've got a certain gift that allows you to get away with things. I've seen it from close-up. I'd say it's because you don't care so much what others think. You do awful things then act like you haven't done nothing. People look at you and never assume the worst about you, at least straight off. It's a good attribute to possess for a wise guy. It means at the very least you can get a head start on the posse that's coming for you later."

But you thought there was no reason to become a criminal at all if you were going to be subservient to the wishes of others. You thought that if you ever found yourself in the situation Inmate Number Two was describing, you would just drive away with the haul and wait for the capos to come after you. What difference did it make at this stage in life who was hunting you? Capo and cop both were mere monsters under the bed as far as you were concerned, childish aberrations whose power over you vanished as soon as you recognized them for the empty vessels that they were. Somebody else had programmed them, they were on somebody else's payroll. They could kill you but, let's face it, your days on this earth were numbered regardless. Something was wrong with your liver, for example. You could feel its hardened contours when sleeping on your stomach. You were losing your

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marbles at an uncertain rate and this deficiency might well kill you before the bad liver had.

"I don't really respond so well to simple threats," you told Inmate Number Two whose real name you had never known. Given your surroundings you saw no reason to learn it. This was an intentionally dehumanizing place despite Dr. Jefferson's therapeutic intentions for it. You were vaguely surprised you all hadn't merely been assigned a number like in the prison films of the 1930s. You didn't understand the reason for this oversight. You were convinced nevertheless that it had nothing to do with compassion or the need for all men to be able to know themselves better absent of the coercive pressure of the state.

Indeed, the reason you were in stir at all was somebody had once called you names and issued vague threats against your person. Resultant from this, you were now at a particularly annoying stretch of the space-time continuum, playing a prisoner playing a mental patient playing Dr. Jean-Paul Marat's loving but ultimately ineffectual wife, Simone. Once Charlotte's knife was inserted into some portion of the condemned propagandist's presently fleeing form, the play called for you to rush to his side and cradle Marat's dying form.

"*C'en est fait de nous,*" you were supposed to exclaim echoing as a bit of faked improvisation the name of one of Marat's own pamphlets. And then the music would play. Musical instruments with their hard metal parts were banned from this prison by state edict. So, the orchestra had been pre-recorded. It was Sade himself who controlled the reel-to-reel. Something symbolic in that. This was Dr. Jefferson's vision though you were past the point of caring. The six piece included a xylophone and French horn. Sounded like shit, but in a very post-modern way. It was bad music as commentary on bad news. It was meant to be absolved of its aesthetic sins:

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*4 years after the revolution
And the old king's execution
4 years after remember how
Those Portias took their final bow*

*String up every aristocrat
Out with the priests and let them live on their fat*

*Four years after we started fighting
Marat keeps up with his writing
Four years after the bastille fell
He still recalls the old battle yell*

*Down with all of the ruling class
Throw all the generals out on their ass!*

*Why do they have the gold
Why do they have the power why why why why why
Do they have the friends at the top*

Why do they have the jobs at the top

*We've got nothing always had nothing
Nothing but holes and millions of them
Living in holes
Dying in holes
Holes in our bellies and
Holes in our clothes*

*Marat we're poor
And the poor stay poor
Marat don't make us wait any more
We want our rights and we don't care how
We want a revolution
Now*

The character of Sade was, in keeping with this execrable production, portrayed by a flouncing boy rapist named Herman MacGregor.

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"Never mind what's wrong with me, what's wrong with you," Mr. MacGregor commented to one of the interminable Mental Patients/Actors/Prisoners at his disposal in fifty minutes intervals. He approached this yob-o with his chest stuck out in the manner that he imagined a decadent French aristocrat might do. He struck him squarely in the face with a half opened right palm. It was all off script of course but this was the point of the whole play. The mentally well (if such a group actually had ever existed) had long ago learned to improvise absent of either a script or even a defined character to inhabit. One needed to be more like Sade in this instance and less like the hapless Dr. Jean Paul Marat, who with a knife stuck in his belly had only ever learned how to scream and ask God for forgiveness for unmentioned crimes against His Reign. The pain had forced him back to his animal state, which in this context should be defined as never being able to divert from the script even slightly. Sade was free, it should be mentioned, because he was free of the pain imposed by all moral strictures as well as the pain provided by an eight-inch-deep knife blade interposed in his stomach. He was a psychopath turned literary artist belatedly in life due to the boredom of his confinement. Hardly seemed, therefore, the sort of role model a gaggle of seething reprobates should be presented with constantly in a production without end. There were many in this theater, yourself included, who not merely want to be Sade but murder Sade prior to his uttering of another improvised inanity.

You wondered aloud to Prisoner Number Two how many demerits the murder of Sade would cost you, given the context in which the murder would take place. It would be an act of legitimate stagecraft as far as you were concerned. It might be referenced as such by Dr. Jefferson, despite the dictates of the Michigan penal code. In here, nothing was real. Which made you wonder after the point of moral correction all along.

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Dr. Jefferson, the play's producer, had long white hair that he tied in back into a ponytail with two rubber bands that formed a perfect double helix against the mane it gripped.

"What are you going to do when you're on the outside," he said to you on the occasion of your debriefing. This was after shoving a rolled up "Certificate of Completion" into your right hand. To him you were another lunatic being given the keys to the kingdom. He saw himself as an educator more than a prison warden and was at pains to make this clear to everybody when asked. He claimed a recidivism rate of less than twenty percent, but this was a bogus number. As the prison had been opened less than five years. Likely as not this place was no better or worse than an ordinary prison at rehabbing the lowlifes in its care. At select junctures in their life most men became sick of criminality and simply surrendered to a straight existence. Short of the threat of prolonged incarceration, there was nothing the state could do to influence the decision. Mainstream penologists had long ago internalized this truth. But somehow Dr. Jefferson had been left to his own devices. It would take a decade or more for the bloated state bureaucracy to pronounce the experiment a failure and close this place down.

Congratulations on making your way through the Michigan Experimental Reformation Program (MERP) the Certificate's first sentence, clearly visible through the back of the scroll, read. You wondered when the opportune moment would arise to throw the goddamn thing away. As it had your name on it and you were just entering your parole, you didn't want to discard it on prison grounds. Dr. Jefferson had a passive-aggressive edge to him that suggested he would be the type who would check in the wastebaskets for evidence of impudence in one of his "graduates" and take action against you correspondingly. He was incapable of irreverence when it came to his brainchild. He was deadly serious in his attempt at scientific reform. He genuinely wanted to save the

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world. He saw nothing ridiculous about this effort even slightly.

In such a person's presence, a man needed to simply restate his own objectives then move out of his sphere of influence as ably as he might.

"I'm looking forward to applying all the lessons learned within this program," you told him and clasped his extended right hand with your left. Maybe there would come a time in the next life where true justice could be rendered against such men by you and all those like you who had suffered mightily under their vainglorious constructs. In a way, this place was worse than the reform school run by the psychopathic priest you had been consigned to in the early 1960s. There, the cruelty was entirely above board, admitted to pridefully, and constantly refined out of a twisted sense of obligation to the immortal soul of man. Here, everything was couched in the positivistic language of pedagogy. The screws were insisting that their victims remove the hatred that they held against them for consistent human rights abuses. They were insisting they were the good guys despite the best evidence to the contrary.

They were ambassadors of kindness from Munchkin-land, brandishing cattle prods in their hands rather than candy canes. Their hypocrisy had unexplored layers to it. You hoped you would never live long enough to determine what these were.

Also, before you left there was a final entreaty on the part of Dr. Krutz to you regarding her Levantine financial manager, Joe Martikian.

"She wants me to find him and kill him," you told Dr. Jefferson who wanted to be known as Dr. J. "Or maybe not kill him completely," you said, trying to distill the conversation you had had with her. "Maybe just rough him up and teach him a lesson. To get him to see that he fucked with the wrong lady. She says in exchange she will write a

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favorable report for my parole. She says I will be allowed to do whatever I want if I comply. She says that her influence is enough to get me out of any circumstance. And whatever bad shit I want to get into I can continue to get into all the while."

Dr. J had come to work today in a gray sweatshirt and dilapidated white sneakers that looked like a large dog had used for toys prior to their being worn.

"I think," he said to you, after your testimony was at an end, "there is a crucial juncture in all speech past which certain words are not to be taken seriously. I think deep down you know exactly what to do. I think you know right from wrong even though sometimes you like to pretend that you don't."

The plan regarding Joe Martikian was to stop off at his house with a fruit basket and a thank you card. You saw no flaw in the man whatsoever. He seemed almost divine to you only in his ability to outrage one of your enemies. You personally had no feel at all for the whys-and-wherefores of financial management. But you saw divinity in his ability to outrage Frau Krutz. She was a ludicrous figure in your eyes. In a way she was as bad as Dr. J. Just a complete bore and not even slightly helpful to you. During her sessions you found yourself nodding off. The fact that she felt the same way about you only aggravated you even more. She was supposed to be the compassionate one in the relationship. She was the one that you assumed to be bound by a medical oath to be engaged in your problems.

The fact that she objectively didn't give a shit was an offensive to you. You thought somehow you would meet her again in circumstances where you could be as rude to her as she was to you. As you hadn't yet been to Buffalo, New York, you thought there was some manner of karma in the world. That trip would mark a tipping point in the way you viewed the world. Despite all that you had been through you were still a sentimentalist. You still believed in some celestial form

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of retribution if not actual justice that would be visited upon the wicked of the world over time.

Krutz was far gone from your imagination by the time you boarded the bus to take you back into the city from this outpost in Michigan's thumb region.

"What'd they get you for any way, a general disturbing of the peace?" Mr. Plug, a generally disturbing ex-con like yourself, asked you ten minutes after the southbound Greyhound pulled out from its Sanilac station. As he had taken the seat on the inside, it would have been difficult for you to glide past him to somewhere else (though you had vowed to try if he hadn't quieted himself over time). He wanted a new friend which was an absurd desire for an ex-con to possess. You told him you had beat a superior of yours senseless because he had insulted you. Mr. Plug was heartened to know this and asked you probing questions about this incident shyly without making eye contact. You would over time, Mr. Plug assumed, come to hate him greatly. He was weak inside fundamentally was the reason why. He needed somebody to protect him, therefore. He needed to be somebody's punk and, newly removed from the prison milieu, was having trouble articulating the need to civilians on the outside.

Plug assumed your hulking sullenness as a sign of strength and thought to introduce and demonstrate his capabilities to you.

"I can sing and dance, put on a show for all interested parties," he said to you using a type of prison slang of which you were unfamiliar. Despite the asp that had curled itself around your heart starting at adolescence, you were still not fully institutionalized. You saw those men from real prisons downstate who had wound up in Dr. Jefferson's funhouse and noted the difference between you and them utterly. At least superficially they were men who seemed completely at home in this setting. They shit easefully in public view of others, for

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example. They were like small children on the first day of nursery school. They didn't seem ashamed by their circumstances even slightly.

Seeing his hand begin to wander in a circuitous way towards your blue-jeaned right thigh, you showed Mr. Plug the graduation scroll in your right pocket upon which you had scrawled "fuck MERP and everyone in it" in the blue ink of the ballpoint pen they had given you as a graduation gift. This bit of sabotage had meant to brand you as a crazy motherfucker not to be messed with. Of course, this had the effect merely of attracting Plug to you further. After all, he wanted a mean daddy like you to take care of him while on the outside. Unlike you, he had no marketable skill. He had no taxidermy magic whatsoever to turn to. An animal corpse in his care lay there and rotted. He needed help and was increasingly desperate in his search for it.

He would over time ingratiate himself to you up to the point that he could begin asking you for favors.

"We can go back there," he said to you pointing in the direction of the bus's head where the blowjob he had just proposed to you would be administered. Staring at the oval shape of his mouth just then made the suggestion of such a transaction unpalatable in the extreme to you. Truth be told, you never had much of a sex drive. You didn't see the point of such an awkward activity. And after it was over you would have been compelled to have Mr. Plug tag along as it now seemed you owed him one.

Somebody like Plug was a creature likely only the United States penitentiary system could produce abetted by the several pounds of hard drugs that he had imbibed over the years.

"The sixties were my time, man," he said to you before embarking on one of those reminiscences of the Aquarian Age where every high was magisterial and every roll in the hay with some half-known slattern was an epic experience. The

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only flaw in the sixties according to this type of recollection was its evanescent nature. The sixties became the seventies which became the eighties which brought a man up to this moment where nothing seemed as it should be. In prison even now several of Plug's acquaintances had been stricken by a mysterious sexually-transmitted disease whose hallmark was an extended immune-deficiency. Looking at them in this state, the prison doctor to whom they had all been referred declared God's hand to be at work. He had told Plug in no uncertain terms that the sixties were dead. Here was the proof if any more was needed. He doubted that they ever would discover any sort of cause to the disease. It was God-driven stuff. Science was helpless in its face.

Ronald Reagan was president just then and well into his second term. There nothing other than an arms scandal and a particularly vicious recession would mark its passage.

"The problem with the sixties," you told Mr. Plug in a steady way that showed that you had given it a good deal of thought, "is that anybody survived it. You would have a mass die off and then you could supply any myth about the period that you wanted, and nobody could say shit about it. The evidence about what really happened would be missing. None of these post-hippie freaks walking around on the backs of their heels and sleeping in doorways would be there to act as evidence for the prosecution. And then you would be free to make up any lie about the period that you wanted. But I think you'd have to kill yourself first to do so convincingly."

It was a fair point and in reply to you Mr. Plug could only say that you'd had to have lived through it to know what it really was like.

"Same with the storming of Omaha Beach," you said to him in reply. "Same with rectal cancer, I imagine," you said.

You told him that you'd never met anybody yet with rectal cancer.

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"You can go get rectal cancer, man, and tell me if I'm right," you said to Mr. Plug. "You can tell me from your death bed that it's something you need to live through to know what it's actually like."

Words seemed to have failed you routinely. But in this case, they hadn't. Words weren't good for much, as you saw it. Especially when attempting to capture the dark contours of a life removed from the anodyne of love.

They failed you and all others routinely, like spawning salmon marooned on rocks or shallow pools pathetic prior to being completely forgotten. If anything, you had a desire to escape from their influence altogether, to live devoid of verbal constructs altogether like an animal. Happiness, or at least contentment, seemed only possible in this way. The path forward did not rise. So you thought about cutting a path of your own in the opposite direction.

Describing this to somebody like Mr. Plug would likely only get you in trouble. As he was at heart a sentimentalist and would react violently to any sort of negative summation about existence. He needed the dream if only to maintain his fragile equipoise for another year. Oh, he was up against it presently. But, in the immortal words of Scarlett O' Hara, tomorrow is another day. That's why he was putting the moves on you. As opposed to merely sitting quietly and allowing you to sink into despair. He was trying to better himself in admittedly desperate ways. He was driven to it by his own sunny optimism. And nobody could save him from it, including himself.

You thought it was entirely obvious, the path that Plug needed to take to make himself less wretched by degrees. But somehow you couldn't bring yourself to say it even though he was in the process of annoying the living shit out of you.

"Get yourself some religion," you said to him. And by this you meant that he should divorce himself from religious notions entirely and instead adhere to a more grounded,

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scientifically-based worldview. He needed to revel in his desperate longing for something else if he was ever going to believe the evidence in front of his eyes. He wanted to get high, nevertheless, and through the remainder of his days. He wanted to stop feeling so small and put-upon as if it was the only disposition available to him absent a massive amount of drugs and some god in the flesh form to bow down in front of and whore himself to constantly.

When sensing your refusal to engage him on his own terms, Mr. Plug began to weep softly in his seat with his arms crossed over his body. At that moment, you resolved to get off at the next stop wherever it might be. You had no tolerance for a man like this and never would. Newly sprung from jail, his presence was proving even more cloying to you than would have been the case otherwise. To you he seemed like he was intentionally egging you on to greater acts of abuse than you would have considered in less exceptional circumstances. You thought it was deeply unfair that he should be the first person outside of jail you had come in contact with. You assumed if you would have jumped out of your seat to move, he would have followed you around the bus.

You thought the best course of action would be to make a break for it, to simply jump out of your seat just before the door closed. If Plug followed you out, you would beat his ass and risk the wrath of prevailing authority. In this instance, you would have the excuse of having been antagonized by him. Others on the bus if they could be tracked down would aver this as true. Likely in your case they'd still put you behind bars. Again. You were incapable of projecting an aura of sympathy around yourself. People saw you coming and took off in the other direction. It didn't matter how much objective evidence you had on your side. With you, everything was pre-determined.

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The town the bus had finally made it into was just outside of Port Huron and was, if only to judge by the dilapidated terminus that you eventually found yourself standing in, long past its prime.

"Village of Ulro. We always pull in here and pull out," the driver explained to you apologetically when explaining why he hadn't come to a complete stop after he had pulled into the narrow throughway adjacent to the station as you waited to disembark. "Ten years on this route," he told you, "and you're the first passenger I've ever seen who wants to come here. Occasionally they leave but they never arrive. To me it looks like a place ready for the wrecking ball."

You told the driver you had relatives here waiting on your return. Obviously, it wasn't his business why you were disembarking, but the moment seemed to call for you to state the reason why. Something illicit was taking place inside Ulro's city limits or at least it seemed to be in your imagination. Dr. Jefferson's conditioning program apparently had drilled this sense of dread into you deeply. Presently you were having guilt trips about being your own man. You didn't understand why you felt the need to slink around. You didn't know how long it would take for the feeling to vanish.

As time went by you would understand that all of these momentary feelings were mere physical responses to various intellectual cages your oppressors would attempt to place you into. The anxiety and dread you felt should thus be entirely ignored. It should have been conceptualized as no more than a fleeting stomach pain experienced after a large meal. It signified very little but a porting of organic material from one part of the body to another.

The anxiety was a fleeting impression of a never inhabited consciousness. It was blind to its own being. It was an empty experience, nearly imperceptible amongst a thousand empty experiences. It portended little but its own finitude whenever

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it made an appearance into the termite-ridden stage of the theater of your mind.

Feelings were for slaves, after all, for the superstitious and ignorant, and all those in dire need of direction from a controlling entity.

"In the army once while on my second tour it came to me when I was trying to punch my timecard," you said to the only other patron of the only bar in town about this idea. You had walked into this place after a half mile or so of fruitless searching for interesting sightseeing in a town utterly devoid of sights. Well, this establishment seemed to be the center of social activity in Ulro. Unfortunately, the bus to Detroit only came around twice a day and you had just exited off the second one. You'd be sleeping in the terminal likely on one of the ornate wooden benches that seemed a vintage of the nineteen twenties when times around Ulro likely were altogether better. Maybe back then there had been a downtown to speak of. Maybe there'd been a public green of some sort that attracted a variety of civic events when the warm weather came and people were up for prideful celebrations (as much as the rural culture of the day would allow).

The punch-in clock to which you were referring was situated on the floor directly below that one wherein Hung had proudly displayed the communist flag and Robert Wilkinson dreamed the world into existence. There was nothing even moderately special about the device's contours or innards. Your dark epiphany proceeded independent of its functioning almost as a reaction to it.

"They wanted you to be their slave, to be part of the clock or an extension of it," you told the man bending an elbow next you, a half Ojib whose given name was Esau Bradley. Firm handshake on Esau, stemming from his work likely in the pork canning factory on the town's outskirts, twisting the lids in place. Upon seeing you there, he immediately extended his

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hand to be shaken. Just like you he was here because he had nothing better to do. His shift didn't start until ten pm. And by-and-large he was sleepless during the day.

So you recalled the dressing downs you and partner Bill Gladd had received when the numbers the clocks stamped on your inserted punch cards were off by more than two minute intervals from shift to shift.

"There was nothing wrong with their being off, nothing that they could point to that suggested that we were off doing something we were not supposed to like smoking cigarettes in the breakroom," you said to Esau then stared down at the drink you had just been poured. Two fingers of Wild Turkey, on the house after you had announced that you had just been sprung from MERP. It was the first sip of whiskey that you had downed in years. It restored your humanity, after a fashion. Made you consider the sunnier possibilities in life, if only temporarily just before the darkness once more began to coalesce inside.

The point for them was there was a human element at play accounting for the discrepancies which smacked of the sort of imprecision all penitentiaries were attempting to eradicate.

"They saw us as prisoners with privileges merely," you said. "A type of necessary evil that over time they would eliminate as it was part of their mission to do so. Which was to say, it was all about control, first of their immediate environment then of the entire world. The screws wanted in their way to turn the entire earth into Leavenworth. They wanted to dominate their immediate area as insects want to dominate their immediate area. There's no reasoning behind it in the slightest. It's like a gag reflex with them, the way it works. It has nothing to do with the sort of people that they are. You would ask them individually why they were behaving in this way and they wouldn't have an answer for

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you. It's just the way they happened to see the world at the moment."

Not that ordinary humans held any type of superior moral sway with you, but the problem with having a machine for a boss generally was that they were impervious to either threats or intimidation. They were unaware of their interacting with other parts of the universe. They didn't know what it meant even slightly to be fearful about the extinction of their consciousness.

"You could take a hammer to one of them if you wanted," you said to Esau, after downing the sipping whiskey in a gulp, "but the problem was that your action would do nothing but land you in hot water later. It would be an act of futility, not of liberation. After which they would have more ammunition about pronouncing you defective in some essential way. They would accuse you of thinking like a machine that's broken. So the thing to do was always just to keep your own counsel and play along. You would have your soul that you could nurture during off hours. They couldn't bust you for reading Romantic poetry in your off hours. They couldn't make it an issue of work performance like maybe I'm assuming they can do now."

So it was you assumed the guilt and sense of responsibility you were feeling to be the work of machines trying to make you conform to whatever rhythm they had in mind for you. Aside from Romantic poetry, whiskey helped greatly to restore the sense of indifference regarding schedules you felt it was every individual's birthright to be indifferent over.

"Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained," you told Esau quoting your favorite poet and allowed that the producing of such an elegant turn of phrase was at least worth the price of another shot of Wild Turkey.

"It's not that I lack for cabbage of my own," you said to Esau, flashing your open billfold both at him and the barkeep.

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The hundred sixty dollars that was in there had been given to you in your debriefing courtesy of the State of Michigan. It was the least that they could do for you really, owing that they were throwing you out into the world helpless. Hard to get a job with a felony conviction hanging over your name. The compassion they put forward to you in this instance was entirely pragmatic. It wasn't real compassion at all, therefore.

You weren't a deadbeat, at any rate, not yet, and you didn't want to be accused of relying on the kindness of strangers to gain a buzz off strong drink. Likely if they bought you round two you would buy them round three and maybe a serious bit of negotiations could be entered into surrounding rounds four and five. On the other hand, absent a steady job, a hundred-sixty smackers wasn't a whole lot of cash to be in possession of no matter how much it seemed to impress your two companions at the moment. For example, the bus ticket to Detroit would have to be bought from this pile. The state wasn't about to give you a voucher for sightseeing in Ulro. They likely expected you to make your own way over to your parole officer for the meeting scheduled three days from now.

You said to Esau Bradley that if he bought you a whole bottle of whiskey you would owe him for a full two hours labor. You said that you were willing to perform the work before the drinking started. It was overwhelmingly likely there was all sort of shit to do around this part of the world. The city looked to be falling apart by degrees. It looked to be returning to the black-gray earth from which it had slowly emerged from over the course of decades in the nineteenth century.

The history of Ulro, Michigan was largely unwritten and therefore was unknown to all but the most circumspect of residents of this area. Fortunately for you, Esau Bradley had more or less appointed himself town historian and set about this thankless task at those hours after his shift had ended. He

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could answer any question that you threw at him about the place. He didn't need research notes. He could point to one of the many abandoned buildings nearby and tell you what sort of commerce had taken place there prior to its abandonment and for how long.

First public hanging in the incorporated state took place right down there in the vacant lot that used to be a park. Two nigger boys, he said, that burnt a barn and stole a chicken in no sequence that Esau was able to puzzle together from news accounts of the event. That's all that the local newspapers reported, that they were niggers. The single revelation voided all the other revelations. There was nothing more that an educated white reader needed to know about the condemned.

"The judge, the presiding official or whatever you want to call him, was a man named Edward Mundy," Esau told you and stared out at presently imaginary structures that existed merely in his mind's eye. He was recalling distant times as simple myth. As they had long since passed through the filter of his own ignorance to change fundamentally.

Presently he knew what it all meant but lacked the ability to articulate the knowledge to anybody else. Always he thought such tongue-tied-ness was problem that could be solved with a judicious bit of research and multiple rewrites of the history of the entire thumb region that he was preparing. He thought a usable draft of his text was just a few months away. It was utter gibberish, however. He didn't understand the limits of the historical perspective. He didn't understand the difference between speculation and assertion.

He was writing a work of fanciful fiction masquerading as historical narrative. Eventually it would be pointed out to him and he would struggle with what sort of criticism this was exactly. He wouldn't be able to objectify his own work to any degree. It would become a private history of his own unconscious. Which was a worthwhile enough object to birth

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into creation (though any number of stuffed shirt academics might disagree).

Judge Mundy would go on to form the first Great Lakes chapter of the Klan in 1890. Once they hanged these poor devils, Esau told you, the judge cut them down and attempted to set their corpses on fire as a show of their disgust for them.

"He was blind drunk at the time," Esau said, noting the report's euphemism of his being "out of sorts." In the end, he succeeded only in igniting himself. A water bucket brigade was quickly assembled, and his life was spared, not revealing whether this in his editorial judgment should be considered any sort of good thing.

On a fortuitous note, the Michigan Klan expelled Mundy from its ranks as his burns in their judgment had transferred his race from white to something closer to Indian. Couldn't abide him in their gatherings no matter how great was his espoused hatred for the mongrel races of this earth. He died alone by his own hand in an Ulro boarding house that used to stand right next to the bar they had been drinking in. This structure itself had been subjected to destruction by flame in 1930. The cause was never ascertained due to lack of interest by prevailing authority. Lot of foreigners lived in there apparently by that point, a lot of mixed-race Indians down from the reservations of the north after the outdoor guide trade had dried up while on the downward slope of the Great Depression.

So many similar stories of violence and misery in Ulro had transpired over the span of decades that even Esau Bradley had stopped differentiating between them. Of late they had fused together in his imagination as a chimera, a grotesque assemblage of many truths forming a single lie. The problem with unhappy reminiscences was that almost by definition they lacked firm intellectual boundaries. Instead they wandered all over the imagination like the running black yolks of rotten eggs after their shells were cracked. Nothing to